CORONET

A gripping thriller of power, money and adventure from the author of THE GRUDGE

PAUL CHEVALIER

THE SHAFT

Wilkie brooded a moment. He was convinced, now, that there really was something to be found and that it was worth big money. And he'd waited all his life for a chance at that. He didn't need to review his willingness to take a few risks to get it, or to worry about what might have to happen to anyone on Dirk's. All that mattered was how much.

'How much?' he said again.

Santander seemed pleased this time. 'I'll pay double what you're already paid, week by week. That makes you my man, whether or not there is anything on Dirk's to discover.'

'And if there's a big pot of gold as Bowman thinks?'

'We'll talk again. You'll have opportunities. If there is indeed a great deal of gold, you'll be better placed to bargain with me than you are at the moment. But obviously you could look forward to being moderately rich.'

'You've got a deal,' Wilkie decided after only a moment's hesitation. 'When do I start?'

'Now,' Santander said. He took a long envelope from his inside pocket and pushed it across the table.

About the author

During the war Paul Chevalier was the longest serving editor of the forces newspaper BURMA STAR. Later a shipping journalist and sub-editor on several national newspapers, he was widely known in publishing and book-selling as one of the most successful publicists of the 60s and 70s.

Sadly, Paul Chevalier died shortly after completing *The Shaft*, and the final revisions were undertaken by one of his closest friends, fellow author Eric Clark. The result is a novel in the highest traditions of suspense-story writing, which will delight anyone who enjoyed Paul Chevalier's previous novel, *The Grudge*.

The Shaft

Paul Chevalier

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For
LEIGH and MURRAY
and Nina and Peter

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FOREWORD

A glance at a map of Nova Scotia suggests that Oak Island, on Mahone Bay, is an unlikely location for a 'treasure island'—which should, perhaps, be remote and almost inaccessible. Oak Island is readily accessible from the mainland and only just off the provincial and trunk highways.

Many theories have been advanced to explain the complicated subterranean workings discovered there through generations of patient work. None, though, has been substantiated, and that in itself adds to the mystery; so much has been done there, by so many groups, that failure to pin down the identity and motivation of the original Oak Island engineers seems barely credible. Yet it is so.

Since the late eighteenth century, many attempts have been made on Oak to reach a supposedly vast treasure. Quite early in the excavations, a man-made vertical shaft, perhaps three hundred years old, was discovered and excavated. It made an encouraging start. Later, it was discovered that the shaft was 'protected' against such excavation by cunningly engineered traps fed with sea water by deep tunnels leading to beach inlets at a considerable distance. Digging out the shaft automatically opened the tunnels, flooding the excavation with an enormous weight of water. Even though they proved as disastrously efficient as devised, this, too, must have been some kind of encouragement for the diggers.

Today, the mystery remains intact and there is nothing to disprove the wildest theory. Even the notion of an Aztec hoard, buried for safekeeping against the conquistadors, is not as odd as it sounds. It is not the theories about Oak which are incredible, but the very existence of the challenging, mystifying workings.

To me, one of the most surprising things about Oak is that

only relatively few people seem ever to have heard of it, though there have been books on the subject and the island has been featured occasionally in volumes offering a collection of great unsolved puzzles. I first read about the island in one such collection about fifteen years ago. At that time, yet another group was planning a new assault on the problem. As far as I know, neither that group, nor any other since—and Oak expeditions are a fairly regular thing—has achieved any kind of answer, far less the treasure itself.

Impatient for the mystery to be solved, I began to wonder what might result if all the resources of a modern mining corporation were brought to bear on Oak: a mighty, diesel-electric hammer to crack an obstinately intact nut. It was an engaging idea and it led naturally into this story.

The Oak Island sites are, or have been, almost continuously leased to one syndicate or another. In posing a fictional solution to a similar mystery, and in references to the Oak ventures, I do not wish to denigrate in any way the efforts of those who have worked there, nor do I vouch for the accuracy of any reference to the work there.

P.C.
Oxfordshire
March 1981

PART ONE

NEW YORK

1

In his private room on the nineteenth floor of the Bowman-Brace building, Nicholas Aubyn Bentinck watched the clock, waiting to be dismissed for the day. There was no question of his leaving until he had made a final appearance in General Bowman's suite, and he couldn't do that until summoned by the red light mounted on the far right of his desk.

He disliked the end of the business day. Once he left the building there was, more often than not, nowhere to go but home. It was a moment which regularly confronted him with the loneliness of his self-imposed exile in New York. It wasn't always like that, of course. If he was tired, tense or had taken a lot of stick from Bowman, he could sometimes quite enjoy locking himself into his tiny apartment for the evening. What really pinched, though, was that he usually had no other choice.

Not only that; it further undermined his self-esteem, already at a low ebb. During the day, working close to the general, he often felt a bit of a fraud; under-talented, under-employed and something of an indulgence on Bowman's part. So that spending his evenings alone, amid the squalor of warmed-up convenience food and endless television, it was the more difficult to set out each day with any convincing image of himself as high-priced, high-powered help.

Bentinck stood up. He might as well get ready. General Bowman had been presiding since lunch at a stockholders' meeting. When Bowman called, it was unlikely, this late, that he would make any fresh demand on his special assistant.

Bentinck had few tasks of his own. With Bowman pre-occupied or away, the hours dragged. When Bowman was around, the day was a turmoil of international activity which frightened and defeated him as much as it diverted. He could

never decide which was preferable. Today had been uneventful and consequently endless.

The evening promised to be better, though. He had a dinner date with a pretty, dark-haired law assistant from the twelfth floor. He looked out hopefully, but it was prematurely dark for October and a squally rain was falling. That was a pity; cabs were going to be difficult, if not impossible. He could have used an early start.

Watching over his shoulder for the signal light, he stepped into his private washroom, washed his hands, checked that his thin, fair hair was carefully arranged across the top of his head, tightened the knot of his tie a fraction and took down his raincoat.

The red signal came on as he closed the washroom door. Relieved, he put down the coat and hurried through.

General Bowman was standing behind his desk, feet apart, hands linked behind his back, wearing his keen, field-commander's expression. He lifted his chin at Bentinck, paused just long enough to focus attention and then spoke the two words Bentinck least expected or wanted to hear.

"Dirk's Island," he said. And after a long pause, "Our licence for exploration expires at the end of July?"

"It does, General, yes." Bentinck had negotiated the licence himself. Now he rapidly marshalled his thoughts about the Dirk's Island project. It was something that hadn't been mentioned, far less discussed, since the summer. Its revival now was something of a surprise. He knew instinctively that this was going to be bad news.

"Dirk's Island," Bowman said heavily, "is my project. Why should anyone else be interested? What do they know? What could they know?"

"Sir?"

"A second lease has been granted," Bowman said. "To run from the day after our own expires. Exclusive exploration for twelve months beginning August first next year." He looked penetratingly at Bentinck. "You find that surprising?"

"I do," Bentinck said uncomfortably. He stepped round the implication that there had been some leak from the

building. "Of course, our spring expedition wasn't exactly secret."

"I find it surprising, too." Bowman sat down behind his desk, laid his palms on his blotter and read from a tiny handwritten note. "The new lessee is a consortium calling itself Santander Exploration. I have someone working on that. However, this poses a serious problem. It means we have only eight months in which to mount and carry out our own Dirk's Island exploration." He stood up, marched to and fro briskly, came to a halt and looked at Bentinck keenly. "In your opinion can it be done?"

Bentinck hesitated only a moment. "Yes, sir," he said. "It can. The season for work on Dirk's would be the same as on Oak Island—from May to September. Provided that the work force went in promptly at the beginning of May we would have three months, perhaps the best months. That might be enough. Of course, the camp would have to be prepared during this winter. Conditions wouldn't be ideal, but the work is simple enough." He allowed himself a pause, as if reading back that much. "Yes, it can be done."

General Bowman smiled. "Good!" He remembered the chin and lifted it again to underline his man-of-action mood. "In any case, I want it done, and to that end I have called in this man Collier from the Colorado field. The only snag there, is that Collier has only two weeks of his BBMC contract to run. I want him to renew with us." He swept his hand up from behind his back to present his watch at eye level. "Collier will arrive in New York by six. Meet him. Give him dinner. Explain the Dirk's project in some detail."

Never for a moment relaxing his alert expression, Bentinck heard this with foreboding. If Collier was already on his way Bowman had probably known about it all day and had either forgotten to mention it sooner or deliberately withheld the information. By now Bentinck's dinner date had probably already left the building, which meant a frantic telephoned withdrawal at the last minute—awkward and possibly terminal in its effect on the relationship.

"Right, General," he said.

"Collier," Bowman went on, "is the man I want for Dirk's.

He's a man who gets results every time. So we need him." He put his hands on his hips and swayed forward from the waist to emphasise his point. "We need him and I'd like to be sure that you're going to get him for me. I want you to sell him on Dirk's."

At once Bentinck heard the cracked note in this. Somewhere, somehow, he must have missed something. At no time previously had Bowman uttered as much as a suggestion that Collier's involvement in the Dirk's project was anything but certain. Now, quite suddenly, it had become Bentinck's responsibility to ensure it.

He said, confidently, "It's a rare chance for a mining man to do something different, exciting even. And the terms you proposed are more than generous, as I remember. I can't believe he would turn us down." But a small area of doubt remained in his mind. Something in the files, perhaps; or something that was general knowledge. In any case, he had failed to find out.

Bowman frowned. "Perhaps, Nick, But remember he's ours for only two weeks more. The situation has changed. Collier could have expected a renewal of his contract to remain in Colorado. Then, with a further year ahead of us . . ." Bowman shrugged. "Now it seems we are no longer the only people interested in Dirk's. So your meeting with him is vital. You know the whole history, the whole story. I want you to capture his interest." He looked at Bentinck earnestly, as if asking for the capture of an enemy position against fearful odds.

The difficulties of handing out a plum assignment to a freelance consultant were not obvious to Bentinck, but if Bowman thought they existed then he had need to be wary. Nothing that Bowman asked for was ever easy.

"I'll get started right away, sir."

Bowman's smile returned in a wintry form. "If you're confident . . ." he said, softly. "But please don't fail me."

Bentinck returned to his room, puzzled. It was too bad about the dinner date, but working for Bowman was like that. The after-hours errand was so much a familiar device that it was known among washroom wits as Bowman's Bit;

your life was your own, of course—until the general let you feel the bit, as a reminder that you were a BBMC employee round the clock. Bentinck's own consolation was that he was paid forty thousand dollars a year not to mind—and knew very well that he would be lucky to get half as much at home in London.

He called the girl's flat to make his apologies. She wasn't home yet but her flat-mate took the message with malicious enthusiasm. Bentinck sighed. Another blunder. Bad enough to beg off at the last minute, but to do it so the girl couldn't avoid egg on her face . . . Goodbye, Sally.

He began to sift what he knew about Collier. If Bowman, who could choose from scores of distinguished consultants, believed Collier to be the only possible choice for Dirk's, then the man must be special indeed. Was it as simple as Bowman suggested: that Collier always got results?

There was one comfort to the errand anyway: unfolding to this unique and irreplaceable man just what it was that Bowman required of him. The story and the mystery of Dirk's Island, told over a good meal, ought to be pleasurable.

He went down two floors to check Collier's hotel with Kelso's secretary. She raised her eyebrows at him. "The Algonquin, of course." Bentinck found that surprising—an unlikely choice for a miner. On impulse he put his head round Kelso's door and said so.

The fat chief of operations had lately developed the vinegared outlook that often accompanies imminent retirement. He looked up at Bentinck sourly. "You don't know *this* miner," he said. "When he's not in the field he *lives* there."

"And he's a difficult man, right?"

Kelso, who had not, to Bentinck's knowledge, been consulted as yet on any aspect of the Dirk's project and affected grim amusement about the whole thing, said drily, "Not as long as he gets his way."

Bentinck thought about it. "He's been pulled in from Colorado and he was in charge down there. Safe to say he's not going to like it?"

"Quite safe," Kelso agreed.

"Who's been sent down to take over?"

"Art Corry. Flying in from Mexico"—Kelso looked up at his clock—"about now."

As he hurried down, Bentinck's anxiety grew. Normally luckless and impotent with cabs, he astonished himself by scooping one from the heavy traffic almost at the door. He sat back, grateful at least to have escaped the rain.

Only then did it occur to him how odd it was, how very odd, that someone—some other group—should have dared to pick up a lease on Dirk's Island subsequent to Bowman's own.

At the Algonquin the mad hour was beginning and the lobby filling up.

The desk man promised to alert him when Collier arrived. Bentinck found a comfortable chair with his back to a pillar, ordered a Scotch and water and looked around.

The lobby traffic seemed to double every few minutes. At the cigar-stand end a bunch of TV people shunted chairs into a noisy enclave, monopolised the bar waiter and began to dissect the character of an absent friend. After a few moments, Bentinck found their tensions, shrill talk and trade jargon harassing. He closed his eyes and tuned, instead, to three men on his right. They were movie people, two of them adamant that Jack Nicholson was the right casting for a new movie. The third was enjoying what sounded like a veto.

Bentinck had time now for a twinge of regret about Sally, the young law assistant. A relaxed, confident girl, she seemed attracted by his upper-class British manner and he had been hopeful that with her he might find friendship, even a little sex.

Anything more was out of the question. For always in the background there was Wendy. Dear, sweet, irreplaceable Wendy, for whom he had still two more years to wait in exile, serving Bowman. She was sexy, good-natured, serene and everything that Bentinck desired. But only when her eldest girl was safely into boarding school would she leave her shiftless husband, Ralph, and come to him. That was their arrangement. Meanwhile, the job with Bowman boosted his

earning power and at the same time removed him to a less troubling distance.

The warmth of the lobby, the white noise around him and, perhaps, the Scotch made him drowsy. For what seemed only moments he floated, blissfully oblivious.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and he woke, disoriented. The bar waiter directed his attention to the desk, where the clerk was signalling that Collier had arrived.

A number of people milled around close to the desk. Only one of them was actually registering and he didn't look right. From the dry statistics of Collier's dossier, Bentinck had conjured his own image of the man: mid-forties, enormously experienced and flawlessly qualified, even a touch professorial, dry as dust; short and stocky and perhaps given to bow ties.

This man, though, was tall, wind-burned, rangy, and wore faded denims and a rumpled suede jacket. He looked tired and out of place—more like a cowboy than a consultant.

Doubtful, Bentinck moved in closer. "Alan Collier?" he asked. It came out frankly incredulous.

A bright blue stare flicked at Bentinck briefly. "Right," Collier said, unbending and incurious.

It was almost a rebuff. For a moment Bentinck was taken aback. He mustered his charm. "I'm Nick Bentinck," he said. "General Bowman's special assistant. I'm sorry I didn't have time to get out to Kennedy to meet you. The General is, uh, rather a demanding employer at times." It was an introduction, a bit of flattery and a precise statement of his own status all in one sentence and Bentinck was as pleased with it as if he'd rehearsed it.

Then he wondered if Collier had heard. He seemed to stare at the floor a moment, breaking off to hand his bags to the bell captain. When he finally looked at Bentinck it was with an expression of controlled hostility.

"Terrific," Collier said. "You're Bentinck. Well, you did fine, Bentinck. And you were right to think of bringing me in. I almost turned round at Kennedy to go right back. We're in the middle of something big down there and I'm needed."

He produced a fast-fading smile. "Anyway, nice to have met you . . . "

Again Bentinck was jolted. "I'm glad you didn't go back," he heard himself say. "The General very much dislikes being thwarted." He regretted this at once. He had meant it to sound jokey and confidential. Instead it had come out pompously, making a lackey of him. Now, with something like horror, he watched as Collier ducked his head in amusement.

"Well now, you can relax. I'm here. And I'll see Kelso first thing tomorrow. Okay?"

Bentinck flushed deeply. He was being dismissed. Somehow it was going all wrong. It was as if he and Collier were using different behavioural routes.

Collier had waited a moment longer and was now moving to the elevator.

Desperately, Bentinck cobbled together a broad and wobbly smile. "No," he said urgently. "Not Kelso. Forget Kelso."

Collier checked comically in mid-stride, but only half turned.

"General Bowman wants me to brief you on a new assignment," Bentinck blurted, ashamed of having to borrow authority so soon. Aware that he sounded shrill, he abruptly slowed his delivery. "I thought if you wanted to rest, wash up . . . whatever, I'd relax here with a drink and then perhaps we could have dinner together later."

The elevator arrived and Collier stepped in. Bentinck gaped. What the hell was wrong with the man? Where were his manners? Why didn't he stand still?

The elevator operator, who had caught only Bentinck's final sentence, looked from one to the other as if Bentinck had made an improper suggestion. He smiled warmly at Collier.

The doors almost closed on Bentinck as he followed, reluctantly. "You're going to brief me?" Collier sounded incredulous.

"Initially, yes."

Seeming to digest the unbelievable, Collier said, "You're a mining engineer?"

"No," Bentinck admitted. "But it is only an initial discussion—and rather a long story." He was further discomfited by a sudden, sharp insight into the way Collier might see him: tall, overweight, rather pink-and-white, with the suggestion of a double chin. An under-exercised smoothie; a boot-licker, even, expert only in survival and the uses of the expense account. All that and British, too.

At the fourth floor Collier stepped out smartly and turned right. He seemed either to take for granted, or not care, that Bentinck would follow. Over his shoulder he said, "General Bowman," he put heavy irony into the rank, "left something out of your briefing, Bentinck. My contract with BBMC ends in two weeks. What I do next is something I decide for myself."

He put his key in a door. "Meanwhile, I've left three hundred men sitting around on their butts looking at a hole in the ground . . ."

"Only to end up having dinner with me," Bentinck rallied. "Pretty irritating. I do see that. But you know it is a Bowman-Brace hole in the ground. And I'm afraid it's already someone else's concern." He was further ashamed of using this bombshell so soon in order to bring Collier up short.

Collier froze on his threshold. "Whose?"

"Someone called Art Corry. A good man, I'm told."

Collier thought about it. "A good man, but in Yucatan."

"No," Bentinck said smoothly. "Corry is"—he used Kelso's gesture, checking the truth of it by his watch—"arriving in Colorado about now."

Collier turned to stare at him angrily, then threw open the door of his room. For almost a minute he said nothing, seeming to rage inside himself.

"All right," he said coldly. "So brief me."

2

The Hotel certainly looked after Collier. The room was a small suite. Books that looked as if they might be Collier's own were already stacked on two small tables. A bottle of wine was on ice by the Chesterfield. As Collier moved about, unpacking, Bentinck noticed that both closets held a fair assortment of clothes in protective bags.

In an awkward silence he began, "I think I might, just might, understand how you feel about the Colorado field and not being able to hand over properly. But the General does have something rather special in mind." He added hurriedly, "That he hopes to interest you in." Was that putting it too diffidently?

Collier rattled the wine in its ice, poured two glasses and went on with his unpacking.

Bentinck picked up a glass and sat down with it by the window. On impulse he shifted ground and tried, instead, an approach of boyish candour. "All right," he confessed, "I know bugger-all about Colorado. I'm just a messenger boy. But at least listen to the message."

Collier had shed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He took a long draught of wine and looked at Bentinck wryly. "Very few messenger boys wear Savile Row suits and have their shoes hand made," he said.

Astonished, Bentinck looked down at himself, making another rapid adjustment. "Actually," he said, "the suit isn't so much part of the job as how I got it."

"Oh, I believe it," Collier said drily. He unpacked some more books and made fresh stacks of them. He paused, looked steadily at Bentinck for a moment, then said, "Look, you've probably read a file on me—don't tell me ol' Bowman doesn't keep files on everybody—and made some guesses,

right? From Montana, it says, and you got me down as some kind of farm boy with a little technical education. A miner, it says, and you probably think it's done with picks and shovels."

Bentinck opened his mouth to protest, but Collier drove on angrily, "But you've got it wrong, Bentinck, old boy. I sometimes go a whole year without even touching a shovel. And I've worked in more countries than you've had birthdays."

"I'm humbled," Bentinck said, meaning it.

"Well, we'll kill the bottle," Collier grudged, "then you can say your piece." He took his own glass into the bathroom and a moment later Bentinck heard the shower running.

Left on his own, Bentinck examined the books. They were mostly popular fiction, suspense thrillers, the odd straight novel, one or two pieces of equally popular non-fiction. It told him nothing at all about Collier. They were much the sort of thing he read himself.

Collier emerged from the bathroom and refilled their glasses.

"All right," he said sourly. "What's so special that it's Bowman's own signature on the telex calling me in, so big that Kelso isn't a part of it, and," he scowled at Bentinck directly, "so delicate that the General's man has to make sure I'm warmed up in advance?"

Bentinck suddenly wished he hadn't given up smoking. He needed a cigarette badly. He hoped he had control of his anxieties.

"May I do this my own way?"

Collier shrugged impatiently.

"Well, uh, to begin with, how much do you know about Oak Island?" Oh, God, he thought, cold, like this, it isn't going to work. His hope was that Collier knew at least something. Perhaps enough to whet his appetite, but not so much he had Oak theories of his own that might prove an obstacle.

Collier's scowl deepened. "That Oak Island?"

"The same."

Collier sighed. He dropped into an armchair and tilted his

head back, concentrating. In a tired monotone he reeled off not only the basic facts about Oak but some details new even to Bentinck who, in order to satisfy Bowman, had read most of the available books and records.

The place was a magnet to treasure hunters. The story had begun with two boys, out for a walk, discovering an unnatural depression in the ground on the island's south-east corner. That had been in the late eighteenth century. Ever since, for almost two hundred years, there had scarcely ever been a time when one team or another had not struggled against poor conditions, bad weather, indifferent or diminishing funds in order to uncover the island's secret. Sometimes the diggers retired defeated. Sometimes they paid with their lives. And still Oak Island continued to frustrate the best laid plans and the keenest minds.

The depression had been revealed as a deep, man-made shaft, tantalisingly suggestive of a rich reward to be won. But it had also proved to be protected by ingenious death traps. Time and again the patient diggers had been suddenly inundated by sea water carried, unbelievably, in tunnels dug under the island directly from the shaft to the tides of one beach or another.

The more complex the island's workings had proved to be the stronger had grown the conviction that they must conceal some immensely valuable hoard. Why else would the unknown engineers have lavished such time and labour on their construction, providing it with such elaborate traps?

"Of course," Collier said now, for the moment forgetting his detachment, "all those guys were crazy. They all thought they had some special edge—they could crack it when nobody else could. But what you'd really need in there is big plant. Blast it open, rip it apart, doze it down, collapse the water tunnels." He shrugged. "Or perhaps not, I don't know. Something weird always seems to happen on Oak. The lease runs out, or the money. The weather goes crazy or the machines break down. You need big resources to keep a team self-sufficient in isolation like that." He gave no sign that he connected these thoughts with Bentinck's mission.

Bentinck nodded, well pleased. It was better, after all, that

Collier knew about Oak Island. If he'd never heard of it—and it was a phenomenon astonishingly under-publicised—he'd have had to work hard making the points which Collier himself had just emphasised: that somehow Oak Island expeditions always failed. True, some of the failures were not sinister. Some had ended in disaster simply because the teams had not solved, either at all, or in sufficient time, the problem of the treacherous flood tunnels which, again and again, filled the patient excavations of weeks with sea water.

And yet the solid facts of the Oak ventures, as carefully documented as any military campaign, had about them more than a touch of the fantastic. So much so that there would have been problems from the start if he'd had to launch unaided into the improbable truth.

The struggle wasn't over yet, he reminded himself. Collier's attitude still suggested that Oak, interesting enough in its way, held nothing which challenged or excited him.

Anxious to hold his attention, Bentinck said earnestly, "I think you'll agree that it barely matters any more who buried whatever is there. What is absolutely certain is that no one prepared such a fantastically ingenious underground island bank without putting into it something worth taking all that trouble over. They must have had either a huge labour force or years in which to get it right." He looked to Collier for agreement.

"Sure," Collier said flatly. "Great stuff." He looked at Bentinck, impatient for him to come to the point

Bentinck hesitated, pushing away the moment of success or failure. Slowly now, he told himself. He sat back, waiting until he held Collier's eye.

"Fancy solving a puzzle like that?" he asked lightly. And held his breath.

Collier stared back. "No!"

Bentinck struggled a long moment to conceal his irritation and disappointment.

"You can't mean that?" he said, lamely. It came out with a cracked laugh, a little off key, like an actor having trouble with a bad line.

"It's not Oak Island," he pressed. "It's Dirk's Island.

Same coast, a little farther up. Three miles offshore and wholly private. A virgin site, leased now by General Bowman and with proof of the same sort of man-made shaft, perhaps three hundred years or more old." He ignored Collier's stone-faced disinterest and with a con-man's steady gaze tried to transmit a sense of conviction that Collier would come round to it. "That's your new assignment," he said very firmly.

Collier laughed shortly. He stood up, indicating their talk was over. "Not me, I've got a job," he said. "Nice to have met you, Bentinck."

Crushed and all but routed, Bentinck lost a few seconds anticipating Bowman's displeasure. He got up, but bent his head thoughtfully, affecting not to see Collier's impatience. "Why not?" he wanted to know. "It could be a great adventure, and strictly speaking you don't have a job just now."

"Why me?" Collier demanded.

Bentinck's panic abated at this further opening for discussion. "It's what the General wants." He spread his hands.

Collier snorted. "Terrific argument. Plenty of other people would do it for him."

"But you're the best. The General has enormous regard for you."

Collier was incredulous. "He's never met me."

"But he wants the best there is," Bentinck said earnestly. "And that's you."

Collier didn't try to conceal his indifference. "It won't be the first time the General got bad news," he said sarcastically. "So don't look so down. What can he do to you? Snap your Diner's Card?" He held his arms out wide, shooing Bentinck towards the door.

Bentinck stood firm. "What I don't understand," he said doggedly, as if Collier were an interesting problem to which, purely academically, he'd like to have the answer, "is why on earth you shouldn't give it a try for a few weeks. It wouldn't pull you off anything now, anyway. Dirk's can't get started until the spring—the weather is too bad before then." He smiled bravely over his shoulder as Collier began to crowd him into movement towards the door.

Sighing, Collier cocked his head. "Imagine you're a heart surgeon," he said dully. "How would you feel about being called in from Colorado to New York to perform a tonsillectomy on the General's butler?" He looked at Bentinck with something akin to pity. "As to saying 'no' to the General—who knows, he might enjoy the experience."

"I doubt it," Bentinck said miserably. "So what's your alternative?"

Collier pointedly opened the door. "Sleep late," he said. "Walk around town a little. I like New York. Perhaps drop in on Art Guthrie."

Bentinck was alarmed. "Guthrie Mining is pretty small stuff compared to Bowman-Brace," he warned.

Collier nodded. "But Art Guthrie isn't out of his head! Goodnight, Mr. Bentinck."

Bentinck backed into the corridor. In another second the door would seal his failure. He hunted desperately for something to say . . . anything at all which would hold on to Collier for a little longer.

"Couldn't we have dinner anyway?" he said. "I'm starving. And I hear the food is very good here."

For a moment he was sure that Collier would refuse.

"I want to get a couple of hours' sleep," Collier hesitated. "But I have to eat. If you want to wait until about nine-thirty."

"I'll book a table," Bentinck said, hope returning.

The door closed on him. He stood there, almost trembling. He had won another chance—perhaps. Now what?

Somehow—perhaps simply by being what he was—he had rubbed Collier the wrong way. Underlying that was Collier's resentment at being taken off the prestigious Colorado field. In effect he, Bentinck, had been obliged by Bowman to make the offer of the Dirk's Island job or nothing—and that at the eleventh hour of Collier's contract. Whereas Collier might reasonably have expected to be offered a renewal, on generous terms, of his command he had been offered instead, take it or leave it, a prank, a rich man's fancy.

How much less might Collier's resentment have been if

someone had been sent down to Colorado months ago? Or even if the offer had been made by one of Collier's own kind, like Kelso?

Bentinck cheered himself with the thought that Bowman was the real cause of this fiasco. Bowman and his imperious conviction that anyone, even an internationally known expert like Collier, could be bought and run like so much daily help.

He sat in the lobby, brooding. If he was going to pull this off, save his own skin, he was going to need some help. But from whom?

Then he thought of Brooks.

He almost dismissed the idea. But it did have a real value. He had never known a man who could resist Brooks. It was impossible to be rude or unkind to her. That she was close to Bowman never seemed to matter. She put men instantly at their ease. She had a candour, an innocence almost, which exerted a powerful magnetism. Even if she refused to help persuade Collier to take the job, she would serve one purpose admirably: she would neutralise the animosity which he somehow engendered in Collier. Then, in a softer mood, perhaps . . .

He hurried to the phone.

3

Collier went down to dinner in a more forbearing mood. There were always other jobs and he had, after all, enjoyed rejecting Bowman's project. Bentinck's smooth manner still irritated, but having made his point he was prepared to be merciful.

Looking for Bentinck alone, he almost missed him. Then he saw him at a favoured corner table with a strikingly

beautiful girl. Glad that he had shaved and changed into a dark suit, Collier approached.

Bentinck introduced his companion as Brooks Remsen, but Collier was too taken with her looks to register more than the unusual first name. He noticed their fresh drinks and two empty glasses. Whoever she was, she hadn't just happened by.

"I hope you don't mind my asking Brooks to join us," Bentinck said. "There can't be too many like her around the Colorado field." He offered no other explanation and Collier let it go.

Collier refused a drink and they moved through the archway into the dining room. Bentinck was urbane, careful. He seemed to have no new line to follow. Or perhaps he was waiting until dinner had produced a mellowing effect. But why the girl?

While they waited to order, Collier found himself looking at her a great deal. She was disturbing. Tallish, with features so precisely sculpted that the lines of cheek, forehead and mouth had a compelling quality. A cloud of fair hair framed her face, while her large, dark eyes gave it an intensity difficult to ignore. But it was her expression that was most provocative; something between anxiety and watchful docility. If Bentinck had brought her along to ward off further friction it was a fairly effective ploy.

He thought he also sensed an odd relationship between Bentinck and the girl. Close, familiar, but asexual. More than once their exchanges indicated an intimate knowledge of each other; as when she startled Bentinck by asking for ham and eggs as her main course. "Just this once, Nick," she begged. And Bentinck, giving the order as solemnly as if she were asking for quail or plover's eggs, explained to Collier, "Brooks eats rather well as a rule."

"Oh? What do you do, Brooks?"

The girl looked to Bentinck for the answer. He smiled enigmatically. "Brooks is with General Bowman—as we all are."

Collier thought she looked like no working girl that he had

ever seen. Her plain black, halter necked dress looked like two thousand dollars worth and she had kept with her and hung on the back of her chair a fox jacket which must have cost four times as much.

She gave her whole attention to Collier, asking well-directed questions about his life in the field. But her manner wasn't over-attentive or cloying. As far as he could tell, her interest was genuine.

She had begun her ham and eggs and Collier was snipping expertly at a lobster on the shell when a waiter appeared at Bentinck's elbow and whispered to him.

Bentinck stood up. "Sorry about this," he said. "The bugle calls."

Collier, well into a heartfelt account of the heat, cold, dust and isolation of some mining camps, hardly noticed his going. He was talking more than he had for months. He was telling it well, too, despite the note of disillusion he recognised again and again in his own narration. Brooks watched him closely, her eyes wider than ever and constantly focussing on his mouth, making it difficult for Collier to chew unself-consciously.

"Why are you here tonight?" he asked her suddenly, testing the odd spell she was creating around them.

"Because Nick asked me," she said at once.

Bentinck returned and hesitated by the table. He smiled, looked from Collier to Brooks, sensing a special moment. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm recalled to headquarters. Right now. Not a summons I can ignore. Alan," it was the first time he had used Collier's first name, "may I ask you to see that Brooks gets home safely?"

Collier smiled thinly. A dinner without purpose. The girl. Now a hurried departure. He lifted a hand in cynical assent.

"One thing." Bentinck waited for him to look up. "If you should change your mind about Dirk's—will you call me first, not Kelso?"

Collier shrugged. Bentinck bent to kiss Brooks's cheek and was gone.

For a long moment Collier looked at her. Brooks dropped

her eyes, prettily. She said, "I'm sorry about that. I didn't think it was a good idea, either, but Nick wanted it . . ."

He was torn between admiration and indignation. Indignation won. "I see," he said heavily. "When reason and coercion fail, send in a broad. Okay, give me the pitch." He heard himself speak the words with something like shock. When he realised he couldn't unsay them he stabbed angrily at his plate with his fork, trying to whip up a small rage. It was unsuccessful. "You know what? If Bowman had sent you in the first place I might have signed. That Bentinck though . . ."

Unsmiling, Brooks said with some dignity, "I'd quite like a brandy and some coffee. But I do understand if you're anxious to get out of this."

For God's sake, Collier thought, who am I to pull all this outraged stuff?

"Once in a while," he apologised ruefully, "the Montana Kid gets out. Comes of living with hundreds of guys all over Perhaps you'd overlook it?"

"Nothing simpler," Brooks said. She took one of his cigarettes and changed gear. "Will you do what Alex wants?"

"Alex?"

"General Bowman."

Disappointed again, he shook his head.

"May I ask why not?"

"I'm not a gambler."

"But it's Bowman's money and Bowman's gamble."

"And my reputation."

She nodded, unhappily.

It was getting late. Collier found he didn't want to part with her so soon and on these terms. He was delighted when she asked, "Will you walk part of the way with me? I'm up on the East Eighties."

West 44th was quiet and shuttered as far as the Sixth Avenue corner. Collier arrested the doorman's whistle hand and steered her the other way, towards Fifth. After the heat and food odours of the dining room, the night was cool and welcome.

He began to unwind, enjoying the walk. He always felt at

home in New York. In the deserts, the plains, the mountain country, in all the camps which had made up his working life, there were constant reminders that the men he worked with all had ties or roots somewhere. A few brought wives along to live with them in trailers. The rest had their letters, photographs and news from home which set him apart. No one waited for Collier and only a few friends ever wrote.

New York was different. For years now he had come back to the city, comfortable among the other transients; a stranger unremarkable in a city of strangers.

Now, tonight, it was good to be back and wearing a suit. Good to be out in the cool of the night with a beautiful girl.

"Brooks?" Collier said, savouring the sound of it. He halted abruptly, astonished that he hadn't made the connection at once. "*That* Remsen?"

"My father."

For almost three decades the name Remsen had been synonymous with quality in the manufacture of drilling tools; a household name in mining and engineering. At one time pre-eminent in the field, Remsen Tool had declined only in the mid-seventies. He recalled now reports of the famous company's final disappearance on merger with the Bowman-Brace Mining Corporation, and later, the death of Remsen Tool's founder, Carl Remsen, still revered in the industry as a pioneer.

"What happened?" He was awed by the thought of being with Remsen's daughter.

In a long silence he was afraid he'd intruded on a continuing grief. Then she said quietly, "The consensus is that Dad was a technical genius but a poor businessman. At first the company grew and grew. He would only allow the best to be made. He fussed over quality, trying to stay on top of the technical side of the business. And he had a good man to look after money, expansion, the future." She shrugged. "This man was so good that the offers finally became too tempting to refuse. When he went, Dad was shocked. They'd been together twenty years. He couldn't understand—thought of it as a disloyalty. And he wouldn't ever give the same chances to a new man in case it happened again. He tried to do

everything himself. Finally he got too tired and involved to cope with the work of either side." She smiled at him sideways. "He was only sixty when he died."

Collier was silent. They walked on steadily, Collier worrying that she would soon want to stop and take a cab home.

"But," Brooks said brightly, "the name lives on. Next month the whole tool operation of Bowman-Brace is to be renamed the Remsen Division. Did you know? I'm grateful to Alex for that."

"And you?" Collier said sharply. "What's your position with Bowman?"

She laughed, a soft silvery sound. "My position? Well, it used to be roughly horizontal. Though of late I've been more or less vertical." She said it flatly and without bitterness.

Collier almost stopped walking, but realised he had no good excuse or cause to display any of the emotions that now assailed him. Even so, he was silenced by his disappointment.

After fifty yards, in a not-too-steady voice, she accused him; "You're shocked. You're judging."

"No," Collier lied. "Tell me about it . . ."

"Why should I?" she flashed. And then, more calmly, "It's a fairly common story. My mother died when I was ten. Dad really brought me up—as if he didn't have enough to do. He saw to my education, my clothes, my health. Anything more than that would have been impossible for him. I went to high school, college, emerged like many other rich kids with some charm, few talents and hardly any need to do anything for myself.

"When the company died, Dad and security died too. I'd never given a thought to what would happen to me. I didn't read the financial pages. When they told me that Bowman's had bought Remsen Tool for about the price of the debts it was like falling out of a low-flying aircraft. I had no idea what would happen, only that it would start soon."

They were walking now along the edge of the park. She looked straight ahead, the line of her cheek exquisite, the lift of her chin poignant.

"What did?" Collier asked softly.

"Why Alex, of course. He was a minor miracle. The first year he was like a rich, doting uncle. He bought my apartment, my clothes, my car. My bank balance was suddenly hopeful. He said he owed it to Dad—that the whole industry owed Dad " Brooks looked at him anxiously. "I wanted to believe that, of course."

"And then?"

"And then—well, things changed little by little. Alex took me to dinner, to first nights, the opera. You know his wife died years ago?" Collier remembered, vaguely, and nodded.

"It was still a bit niece and uncle then. After a while, though, the columnists picked it up. There were pieces about the rich old autocrat and the pretty daughter of his old friend. Actually they were never friends. I'm not sure they even met more than once or twice.

"Alex pretended to be furious, but I think it pleased him. It made him feel younger. And he actually got younger, dressed younger. Then, one night, after a premiere, he made me an offer." She giggled. "Not marriage, of course. But it was an offer —and a sort of ultimatum too. Oh, he never said that. But if I had refused, what then? What else could I do?" She seemed to want Collier to understand her dilemma. When he said nothing, she demanded, "Go to night school? Learn to type and become a secretary?" At last there was a defensive ring to her recital.

She tugged at his arm, insisting that he answer.

"I don't know," Collier said lamely. He wanted to say something else, something sympathetic, but his disappointment was still too deep.

For a dozen paces she said nothing, then she stopped and turned to confront him. "All right," she said, "you aren't judging. But you don't like me so much, either."

"Does it matter?" Collier said hollowly.

"You liked me before," she said, as a child might.

Collier was touched. His earlier impression of her as a mature young woman of calm, good humour was a mile out, he decided. Her perception was acute and her personality endearing, but emotionally she was still as vulnerable now as

the little girl who had been pitched into an all-male world at ten years old.

"I think you're terrific," he said, warmly.

Again there was an awkward pause. It was his move. When he said nothing, she smiled sadly. "I think I should go home now. Could you find me a cab?"

At once his sense of loss was melancholy and sharp. Yet another ending . . . It was always going to be like this until he left field work and got back among people. He was out of touch with everyone, but especially women. He stepped off the kerb, staring, unfocussed, into the oncoming traffic.

"Will I see you again?" she said, behind him. He heard the note of wistfulness, knew it was the last gesture she could make.

"I can't see Bowman liking that much," he said. Christ! What kind of answer was that? Did he want to see her or not?

"Alex? He wouldn't even notice."

His first thought was that a double victory over Bowman would be sweet indeed. Bitterly, he thrust that aside. He said softly, "After today I haven't any idea where I'll be. Some Godforsaken place. There certainly isn't a lot of mining done around here." One part of his mind winced again. This was the old problem. So give up the goddam job! Grab the girl! Grab something, someone!

The moment was ending. Suddenly she gave him a reprieve by saying brightly, "I had thought of asking Alex if I could go along when the work starts on Dirk's."

At first he was too startled to grasp all the implications of this astounding statement. Bowman would never agree, he thought. Though the man was nothing if not unpredictable. Suppose that for some reason it suited him—was *she* serious?

"Why would you want to go?" He was aware that his voice sounded a little odd. Now that he thought about it, the way she'd said it sounded like an offer, an inducement to go to Dirk's. And if it was? Had Bowman himself set it up? He cringed from the thought that Remsen's daughter could be used as a standby bribe, produced at the last moment by Bentinck when all else had failed. It wasn't possible. The girl was totally unconvincing in the role of bait.

Her composure seemed to desert her now. She turned her back on the traffic and looked down, awkwardly, at her hands. "It's hard to explain. And yet—maybe you can understand. I need to be away from New York for a while. Far away."

"From Bowman?"

"Not just him." She looked up, her eyes wide and artless. "I've told you what happened, the way it's been. That can't go on. Alex has been wonderful. But now I need to find something for myself. And here in New York I couldn't even begin to think what that might be."

"No friends out of town?"

"Yes, I have friends . . ." she gestured helplessly. "I'm sorry. Why should you be interested in my problems?"

"I'm interested," Collier assured her.

She gave him a small, grateful smile. "Dirk's is far enough," she said thoughtfully. "And dramatically different enough. And it might go on for months. It would give me time to find out what sort of person I am." She laughed shortly, a small melancholy sound. "The kind I'm becoming I'm not crazy about."

A free cab whirled by. A chill wind sprang up. The street was for the moment empty. She said, very tentatively, "If you wanted to you could insist that I went along."

"Insist?" Collier echoed.

"Yes. I hadn't thought of it until just now at dinner. But you could, you know."

Collier's disappointment was keen. "How could that be?" he said indifferently.

"Alex needs you. You could make it a condition that I went with you."

"I see," Collier said coldly. "*With* me. Not just along." Suddenly he was providing both the way and the reason for her escape from the general. "It's a nice idea," he said. He affected now to remember her cab and turned again to the traffic. A cab slowed, sensing a fare and he waved it in to the kerb. "There's only one snag. I don't plan to take the Dirk's job."

He held the door for her. Her final glance at him was one of

confusion and hurt, as if she regretted having revealed so much of herself to so little advantage. She ducked her head to get into the cab at the same moment that, wanting to keep something between them, he leaned forward to kiss her cheek sympathetically. He missed her and she never saw the gesture.

He watched her fingers, curled on the open window, as the cab pulled out into a late straggle of traffic.

4

Collier sat at breakfast until almost ten, going over the scene with Brooks again and again. He argued that if Bowman and Bentinck really had attempted to use Brooks as a lure, then they had failed and he had lost nothing. If not, and if her version had been wholly true, he had still said and done the right things. On her own admission she was a confused girl, on the run from something she couldn't handle. The last thing he needed was a fresh complication of that kind in his life.

He walked slowly up to Saks, cheered not at all by the crisp October air, the watery sunshine, the blue, drifting smoke from the roast chestnut carts. He bought a light topcoat, browsed fitfully and at times blindly among the new paperbacks in Doubleday, and was back at the Algonquin by noon. There were messages from Kelso and Bentinck.

Making an effort, he ignored the BBMC messages and called Guthrie Mining instead. He was at once put through to Art Guthrie himself, who promptly invited him to lunch.

They ate salmon and an ornate salad in a new and uncharacteristic teak-and-glass corner of Guthrie's huge office.

"So you want a change?" the old man said. "Good for you and good for me." He peered at Collier from under wire-wool

eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own. "There was a time when I could have used you as chief of operations." He pointed an arthritic finger at the adjoining office of Ted Hahn, his number two. "But Ted, he wants this chair when I go, and he's worked for it. Meanwhile, that's the only place he can wait."

Collier smiled. "If he ever needs the money I might like to buy in. Meanwhile, who have you got in Wyoming?" He had read the trade journals carefully and knew exactly what Guthrie could offer and where.

"Bill Parrish," Guthrie said quickly. "Unless you want it? The thing is, it's bigger than Parrish, bigger than we originally thought possible. Uranium—but it needs more development money." He sighed. "I know where to look for it but I need a lot more on paper. That's mostly what Bill's doing: how much, how long, what it will pay in the end. All that stuff." He settled back in his chair. "You could do that for me. Your name on the bottom line would be enough for anyone."

Collier beamed, mildly embarrassed. "What about Parrish? I don't want problems with anyone."

"And wouldn't get 'em," Guthrie assured him. "Bill knows he needs help. Or, put it another way, he'd sooner help you or someone like you." He saw Collier's doubt. "Oh, it's true. Bill isn't really ready yet. Only last week he was in here, near enough saying he needed someone else along to make the weight. And if I'm honest I know I can't raise millions on his say-so."

Collier gave it some thought. There was no way back on the Brooks thing. He might as well get started somewhere. "I'll take it," he said. "But it will be my last job. One year, then I'm getting out. After this I'm going to live like people. Oh, and there's one condition: that you make me do it now."

Guthrie raised a bristling eyebrow, but touched a button. His secretary appeared, a fussy little woman only a little younger than Guthrie himself, and took notes.

One hour later, Collier signed a one-year contract to work on the planning and development of Guthrie Mining's uranium field in Wyoming—on terms less valuable than his expiring deal with Bowman-Brace.

He remained with Guthrie most of the afternoon, looking over the paperwork in some detail, pushing all thought of Brooks Remsen from his mind. Bowman would have to find someone else to command the Dirk's Island folly. By signing with Guthrie he had effectively blocked either temptation by Brooks or coercion by Bowman.

Or had he? He had worked for Bowman Brace several times, but had never met the omnipotent Major-General Alexander Bowman III, US Army (Retd.). Anything he knew about the man was what he'd read. *Time* magazine, which delighted in running Bowman stories, persistently referred to him as 'MacArthur's Hero'—a brittle sobriquet which sprang from Bowman's part in the Korean campaign. Affronting military tradition, Bowman had put his own life at risk by quite irresponsibly assuming direct command of a daring—and crucial—battalion strength thrust through a hail of Chinese mortar and machine-gun fire. He had emerged as a hero to MacArthur and his own men, though it won him a severe reprimand from the Pentagon.

Bowman's father, Alexander Bowman II, had died in the fighting in the American St. Mihiel salient in 1917, an infantry captain. He never saw the son who would later leap to fame as soldier, military eccentric, businessman and ageing playboy.

In the mining world Bowman was more than a curiosity. Inheriting the Bowman Corporation from his grandfather, the first Alexander, he at once irritated the industry's establishment by daring to have a flamboyant, Patton-style military career first, and then, coming as a tyro to the game, making a gigantic success of everything he touched. Against all advice in the early seventies he added the giant Brace Corporation to the already sizeable Bowman empire.

According to *Time* his success as an industry leader was such that his enemies, the envious and even a number of his senior colleagues close enough to the man to enjoy the joke, had at that time dubbed him Alexander The Less. Even those who respected his judgement and his achievements did not deny that Bowman was also arrogant, imperious, peremptory; a swaggering dictator who couldn't bear to be outsmarted or contradicted.

Thinking about Bowman's track record now, Collier reflected uneasily that he would be lucky to have heard the last of the general and his island adventure. Yet what could he do?

At the hotel desk, there were messages from Kelso and Bentinck. He didn't like Kelso much, but they had at least worked together well enough in the past. He called, half-hoping Kelso would be tied up, but he wasn't.

"Thanks a lot," Kelso said sourly. "It's not the kind of thing I like to mention, but your contract with us is still running and at the rate we're paying you, you could do me the favour of answering messages. Could you drag your ass over here tomorrow morning?"

"Surely," Collier said, "so long as it isn't about Dirk's Island. I just now signed for the next year with Art Guthrie."

There was a long silence on the line. "You did *what*?" Kelso breathed. "Jesus! Wait till Bowman hears that."

Collier, enjoying himself, said nothing.

"In which case, don't come anywhere near here," Kelso said. "I don't want your blood on my carpet. And listen, if you got calls from Bentinck, forget them. I'll give the general's boy this piece of news myself." He hung up.

Next morning, Collier put most of his belongings back into storage with the hotel, ate another breakfast, and took a cab to the airport. Guthrie's office had sent across his airline ticket to Stapleton, Colorado. From there he'd be lifted across the state line to Guthrie's field in Wyoming.

When, a few hours later, he stood with Bill Parrish at the edge of the field, his mood changed abruptly. To the west, a man-made mountain of spoil cast a gloomy sunset shadow over the scarred, liver-coloured plain. Giant electric shovels, rippers, dozers, caterpillars and trucks moved on the face of the raw earth like foraging insects. Nothing about it was new to him, but the sheer size and soulless sterility of it made his heart sink. At one time it would have seemed like a challenge. Now, God's sake, was this what he really wanted? Another lonely, lunar purgatory? And uranium—that meant radiation monitoring, special clothes, extra paperwork on manpower exposure, no smoking on the job and many other problems.

For this he had left behind Brooks Remsen, bucked a powerful man, perhaps made a dangerous enemy.

As soon as he could he made the excuse of a New York hangover and found his cabin. He unpacked his clothes and books, brooding. He had signed with Guthrie not only to demonstrate his independence but to stiffen his resolve not to take the Dirk's job for the wrong reason. His emotional response to Brooks herself kept changing bewilderingly. At one moment the idea of accepting her offer to go to Dirk's seemed to have been overwhelmingly tempting, whatever that said about the girl and her relationship with Bowman. Then he would tell himself that he had been right; that the Dirk's escapade was a billionaire's whim, a professional nonsense and that if he had to forfeit Brooks to stay clear of it, well, tough. He railed against the girl herself too, in his mind, angry that she should have offered herself as bait. Or had he got that wrong? Was it just possible that the offer was her own idea? Impulsive, quixotic, perhaps, but not altogether inconsistent with the little he knew of her.

Bill Parrish emerged as a cheerful, energetic, but slightly tentative man. With Collier's help he dived into the field's problems and for a few days they thought of nothing but food, sleep and uranium.

On the third day, Collier caught a bug. Unable to bear his spartan cabin, he had himself driven to a motel outside Riverton, and for two days lay on his bed reading paperbacks and waiting out a misery of vomiting and fever.

When he returned to the site, he began to push himself and Parrish for fourteen hours a day. The food was terrible. He choked in the dust and the wind burned his face red, leaving a pale band of forehead under his hard-hat which made him look like an Indian brave.

For thirty days everything went well. He got used to the site, found the problems of uranium ore more challenging than defeating. Then, one day, returning to the planning shack around noon, they found a telex waiting for Parrish. He read it, exploded with rage and hurled his hard-hat out into the dirt. He held the message out to Collier.

Worldwide operations of Guthrie Mining now under direction of this office following the purchase of majority GM shareholding. Your exploration to continue according to agreed schedule pending review by BBMC planning staff, but Collier now required urgently in New York. Please advise his earliest possible arrival.

Kelso
Chief of Operations
Bowman-Brace Mining Corporation

Collier read it over twice, his resentment returning. It was certainly not a joke; Kelso wasn't the kind. It could, of course, be coincidence.

Parrish had no such doubts. "Well, it's flattering to be wanted that bad."

Collier looked at him, playing it dumb, unable to believe even Bowman would go this far to get his own way.

"It's obvious," Parrish insisted. "This field is the only worthwhile thing Guthrie's got anywhere in the world, and even so it needs a lot more money before it can pay off big. Everything else is either going to work itself out in a year or so, or there's no development money. Old Man Guthrie had to kiss ass half across the world to get the money to start this one right . . ."

"So?"

"So the time to buy Guthrie Mining was before he got this off the ground. Don't tell me Bowman didn't know he could have had the company, the name, the leases, the contracts, the old man's chair and the whole pail of worms for a clearance price a year or so back. Now here comes ol' Bowman with the hots to buy—too late."

Collier remained sceptical. "You don't buy a whole corporation just to get one man, for God's sake."

Parrish grinned. "I know that. You know that. But does ol' monomaniac, kiss-my-ass, general-president Bowman know it?"

The idea was theatrical, outrageous, Collier brooded. But he couldn't shake off the feeling that Parrish was right. Either way, the story of Bowman's purchase, and this interpretation

of it, would, Collier realised, amuse mining men all over the world. The laugh, if there was one, was on Bowman.

Better still, it would defuse any threat to his own reputation. The idea that Bowman had had to buy Guthrie Mining in order to get Collier to Dirk's Island was one which would appeal to the industry. Then, too, if he had been trapped inside a contract, nothing that happened on Dirk's could be held against him.

Collier relaxed a little. Bowman might now be able to force him to Dirk's. But within certain limits he could still go on his own terms. Maybe he couldn't do anything except withhold his enthusiasm, but that ought to give him considerable licence.

There remained only a simmering resentment that Bowman had, in any measure, won the round.

On the way back to New York next day, he reflected sadly that he had rejected Brooks's offer to no avail. How did he stand with her now?

5

Collier chose his most weatherbeaten and crumpled denim for his appearance in Bowman's sumptuous office suite and talked himself into a mood of implacable indifference.

Bentinck, immaculate in a dark blue suit, seemed not to notice. He greeted Collier warmly, his manner sympathetic. Bowman, he said, was expected at any minute.

Collier's hostility to Bowman-Brace was strong enough to include Bentinck and the whole BBMC empire. He slumped in a chair, making a show of sullen disinterest as Bentinck began a further briefing on Dirk's Island.

He looked around. Part of the huge room was furnished as an office, another section as a drawing room and—through

an archway—a third as a dining-room. In this middle section, sunlight from an entire wall of glass made a glittering sea of the blue-green marble floor. Cream velvet armchairs clustered at the edge of an enormous Chinese carpet, like freighters berthed around an island.

"Certainly there's a shaft," Bentinck was saying. "It was found about thirty years ago by a man called Berry, who spent most of his life on Dirk's. He was a young ornithologist when he found the place during a vacation. After a couple of years the place seemed to claim him. He built a shack there and began painting water-colours of the birdlife—all those islands are full of birds: tern, sandpiper, plover, willet, heron, scoter. He sold the pictures to the tourist shops along the mainland coast and lived on the proceeds. He was very much a loner, only leaving the island when he wanted to buy more supplies or sell some of the pictures." Bentinck broke off, looked at Collier thoughtfully. "I think I ought to tell you," he said apologetically, "that General Bowman hates gum chewers."

"I know it," Collier said, working his jaws noisily. "The elevator man told me. I gave him a dollar for this."

Bentinck looked startled, then broke into a slow grin. "Anyway, Berry found the shaft all that time back, but kept it to himself. His idea was that he couldn't work it by himself, but that if anything was ever found on Oak, then his shaft would become important, too." Bentinck paced nervously, looked at his watch.

"What about a drink?" Collier demanded.

"Are you crazy?" Bentinck laughed. "I'll buy you one later . . . So, every summer when the Oak operations began again there was the chance they'd find a big treasure, and Berry lived on that hope. In a way it was all being done for him. But two years ago he couldn't wait any longer. He was sixty and he'd developed cancer. He needed money for surgery. He looked around for a way to get it and the idea occurred to him that a big mining outfit, with heavy equipment, plenty of labour and professional skills could reverse the process and find on Dirk's what had remained hidden on Oak. A big outfit, he thought, would be able to tear the place

apart." Bentinck shrugged. "He doesn't seem to have realised that the Nova Scotia Lands and Forests people wouldn't allow anything of the sort—or that ripping the island apart would finish it as a bird sanctuary. But, of course, he was sick and desperate." He looked at his watch again. "So he wrote to the General."

Collier hooted derisively. "Godsake!"

Bentinck raised an eyebrow.

"They're all the same," Collier scoffed. "All these gold legends. You don't recognise the patter? All the goddam same. The Lost Nigger Mine, The Lost Dutchman, all the pirate treasures and the phoney maps. Every last story has this old guy who hands over the map on his deathbed. He either gives it to some woman who looked after him, or he sells it on his last go round to raise the money for a sick grandchild who needs an operation. What you got here . . ." he rolled his eyes. Bentinck looked crushed and Collier waved him on. "Never mind. What happened next?"

"The General sent two men to look into it. They found that there was every sign that there was indeed such a shaft."

Collier said sardonically, "They didn't by any chance die, too, these two guys?"

Bentinck took a deep breath "The General sent Berry to London for surgery. *He* died two days later; his cancer was too far gone. And yes, as it happens, one of the two men died, too. He had a heart attack about two weeks after he came back. You probably knew him. He was Ted Rowley."

Collier was startled. He knew Rowley, remembered hearing of his death. "Okay," he said. "What about the other guy?"

"Oh, I'm very much alive," Bentinck said smiling, then straightened smartly as Alexander Bowman III made an entrance, followed by a large man with the composure and presence of a Caesar.

Collier remained stubbornly seated. He had seen photographs of Bowman, but the man himself was astonishing. He was, perhaps, five feet ten inches tall, but looked smaller, slim as a boy and with dainty hands and feet. He had to be sixty-five, by the record, yet looked a youthful fifty. There

was no grey in the light brown hair or in the dated thin moustache. The face was relatively unlined. MacArthur's Hero looked physically fit and moved with a precision and bounce that was unnerving.

Bowman's companion was another familiar face. Collier recognised the hook-nosed, patrician features of Borden Hillier, vice-president of BBMC, widely known as 'The Viceroy', of whom it was said that he had the best financial connections in the industry.

Bowman now stepped on several paces past Collier, stopped, turned and put his hands on his hips. He was wearing a pale grey suit of such severe cut that it looked almost like a uniform. He took in Collier's appearance without expression. "Collier," he nodded.

Collier, stung, returned the nod. "Bowman . . ." At the edge of his vision he sensed Bentinck's shock.

Bowman looked at Collier bleakly. "Now why is it that you are so reluctant to undertake this Dirk's Island job?" His voice was surprisingly deep, gruff.

"It's a joke," Collier said.

Bowman ignored the reply. "I'm not asking you to do anything you wouldn't normally undertake," he said. "Dig a hole for me. Take hold of the operation and stay with it up to the finding and breaking of the chamber . . ."

Collier hooked one leg comfortably over the arm of his chair and chewed his gum. "What chamber is that?" he said innocently.

Bowman glanced irritably at Bentinck. "You didn't tell me he was a smart-ass," he said. And to Collier, "There has to be a chamber. Dig the hole, find it. That's all."

Collier shrugged. "You're the boss, Bowman." His tone made it clear that Bowman might have bought his skills but certainly hadn't trapped his interest—or servility.

Bowman stared. "*General* Bowman is the usual courtesy."

"I've been out of the Army a good many years, General, but okay. Mind, if we're going to be picky it's Doctor Collier."

Bowman was surprised enough to lose track. "From the Montana School of Mines?" he said suspiciously.

Collier shook his head. "Golden, Colorado, two years later."

Someone had blundered. Bowman looked reproachfully at Bentinck again. "Very well, Dr. Collier. Perhaps you'd tell me your objection to the assignment."

Borden Hillier had enjoyed all this exchange, Collier saw. He stood directly behind Bowman, his head tilted to gaze with regal amusement on the spectacle.

"I'm a miner," Collier said stiffly. "You need an archaeologist."

"Precisely what I *don't* want," Bowman snapped. "Archaeologists get an orgasm if they find a fossilised dog turd, and anything more significant becomes a reason for their existence. An expert with a 'find' fills the site with photographers, cronies, admirers, sycophants. He writes a book on it, appears on TV with it, lectures round the world on it. I want to find and keep the treasure of Dirk's Island, not fertilise some sordid academic career."

Collier was startled. "If anything is there it will belong to the Canadian Government," he objected.

Bowman turned to glance at Hillier, whose smile simply became less focussed.

"It's mad," Collier went on. "It would take a small army to do it right. You get one season up there, I'm told. A short one. And you'd need crews, drivers, cooks, supply men, heavy equipment, diesel, gas, water. The crews would need shacks and rows of johns. Christ, I'm no goddam forty-niner—it can't be done with a couple of guys with picks and shovels."

He glared at Bowman until Bentinck came eagerly to life. "Give me a list," Bentinck urged. "Base it on a dig as tough as you like. Everything you put on that list will be on the island before you set foot on it."

Bentinck had obviously been intensively tutored since they last met. Collier felt trapped. "It's a waste of time," he growled.

"Your time is mine to waste as I please," Bowman reminded him. He stepped swiftly to a door on his right. "Look, we're not amateurs, not speculators. That gold is

there. And this corporation can bring it up. I want that done and done by you." With a winner's smile he threw the door open.

Intrigued, Collier got up, taking his time. It was a small bare room, the kind from which waiters might have attended the dining area. On a plain table were two models.

"This," Bowman tapped a ship model under glass, "is the motor vessel *Mulberry Hill*, a 3,500-ton coastal freighter now converted to yacht, supply ship and communications centre. She will haul your supplies of diesel, water, gas and heavy equipment. She's berthed at Halifax, Nova Scotia, no more than half a day's run from Dirk's Island."

Collier grunted, conceding nothing, but privately he thought a ship like this did make the thing more feasible. He wondered uneasily if Bowman had more information about possible treasure than had been revealed. "That gold . . ." Bowman had said. Out loud he objected; "If we had the kind of luck on Dirk's that they had on Oak, we'd need help nearer than half a day's steaming."

"Right," Bentinck said quickly. "That's why you'll have your own doctor. General Bowman's personal physician, Dr Clayton, has been assigned to the expedition. And for anything he can't handle, you can call a helicopter off a pad in Halifax within minutes."

Bowman moved to the other model. Bentinck lifted the perspex, box-like lid. "This is Dirk's," he said. "Here is the west coast, facing the Nova Scotia mainland. There are two eastern beaches, almost one really, separated by this small headland. The whole area is called Falla Bay." He moved round the table. "High cliffs at the north end, topped by a stand of pine. As you see, the island sags in the middle—flatland, most of it, scrub or salt-marsh. But there is one good approach from the sea on the east coast, the Atlantic side. That's this beach here. It's the place we've picked out for landing your lightered stores from the ship. The helicopter base is over there, and right here is the camp."

And there indeed it was. Collier tried not to look astonished. The camp, represented by rows of cabins, laid out in a long street, was set at the foot of a long slope down

from the high north cliffs. The larger buildings, perfectly represented in miniature, were all tagged, but Bentinck called them off anyway. "Stores, mess hall, kitchen, showers, latrine block, transport park. It's all there."

"It exists?" Collier was incredulous.

"No, but it will," Bentinck said.

"Nick will attend to all this," Bowman said. "What else can you object to?"

Left with only his resentment of Bowman and his disbelief in the existence of a Dirk's treasure, Collier felt more than ever at bay. "Crazy," he said irritably. "Who would command such a dumb project? Bentinck here?"

"You would," Bowman told him. He gave a short, barking laugh, several notches up from his speaking voice. "Nick will set it up for you. And he will remain on the island as your second in command."

Collier wondered what *Time* magazine would make of all this lunacy. He grinned suddenly.

Bowman instantly took this sign of returning humour as surrender. "You'll do it?" he said.

Collier scowled. "General, you know very well I got no choice," he said. He chewed his gum noisily.

Bowman's features seemed to freeze a little. He turned on his heel and paced away a little with ceremonial step, then about-turned with a totally different expression. "Oh yes," he said nastily. "You do have a choice. Your first refusal I could understand. That was based on insufficient knowledge of the planning that has been done—and incompetent salesmanship on Bentinck's part. I believe he underestimated you."

Collier looked at Bentinck, who, unblinking and watchful, showed no flicker of indignation.

"He's young and used to easy class labels," Bowman said. He looked nettled when Collier burst into laughter and waited with haughty patience until he had subsided. "If you were going to withhold your willing co-operation, you had to do it having all the evidence." Bowman clasped his hands behind his back and raised himself slightly on his toes. "Now here are some more facts. If you withhold that co-operation now, I'm sure you will understand that the run of your Guthrie

Mining contract isn't going to be the easiest of rides." His expression was sombre, his tone sorrowful, inviting Collier's understanding.

Collier hadn't expected anything so crude, but he recovered quickly. Bowman would run him ragged-ass all over the world if he wanted. He tried a different tack: "I may have some conditions," he said tentatively.

"No. No conditions. None at all."

"Like Kelso's job when this Dirk's farce is over . . ."

Bowman's expression didn't change, but from the tilt of his head into a listening pose, Bentinck knew that Bowman's attention had been diverted.

"Why do you want it?" Bowman demanded.

"I'm through with mining camps," Collier said. "I want to sit behind a desk and send some other guy out in the cold and dirt."

Bowman looked pleased with himself. "No one better to fill the job," he said urbanely. "You'd have been offered the job anyway."

So far so good. Collier looked Bowman in the eye. "One other condition . . ." he drew a deep breath. "If Miss Remsen wants to go along, then she goes."

There was a terrible silence. Nick Bentinck looked stricken. Borden Hillier, bemused, watched Bowman with pursed lips. Bowman himself stood still as a wax effigy, his eyes a little empty, as if the man had somehow retired inside himself and no longer looked out on the room. The silence went on, and on.

At last Bowman moved. He cleared his throat. "As leader of the expedition, you will earn a twenty-thousand dollar bonus if you actually find the chamber. Should the chamber yield what I confidently expect, the bonus will be thirty thousand." His body moved, stiffly, as if waking from a kind of coma. "Now what do you say?" He studied the ceiling like a schoolmaster awaiting the correct answer from a dim pupil.

Collier's answer surged up from the gut, unbidden. If the same offer had been made by Bentinck, that first night, it might have moved him even then. But all his life he had been

bugged by a stubborn streak, an inability to bend—even when it was to his advantage.

"Either sum of money will be useful, General," he said steadily. "But Brooks Remsen goes along, too." He heard himself say it with some dismay. Who the hell was he kidding? He could have just thrown away twenty grand. In exasperation Bowman might now call in someone else. There were lots of good men; one of them would do it for the hell of it, reap a rich reward and make a powerful ally into the bargain.

Bowman looked incensed. In his MacArthur pose now, chin in the air, hands on hips, he looked at and spoke to, a point about twelve inches above Collier's head.

"Your condition is granted," he said stonily. "With this proviso. You resume control in Colorado at once and remain there until the Dirk's project has been prepared for a spring start."

"Give me forty-eight hours," Collier conceded.

"Twenty-four," Bowman offered.

Collier nodded.

Borden Hillier clapped softly, as if loftily applauding the spirit and durability of some doomed Christians. Bentinck grinned.

Even Collier relaxed and smiled a little. When he got his breath back, Bowman had left the room.

Hillier, following, paused at the door. "You're a nervy young man," he told Collier silkily. He applied a gold cutter to the sealed end of a panatella. "Let's hope you're also a lucky one."

Bentinck let out his breath and shook his head. "Amazing. I never heard anyone talk to General Bowman like that, never. And what's all this about Brooks? It's incredible." His excitement and pleasure were unaffected, but Collier remained wary.

"Glad you enjoyed it. How do I get hold of Brooks?"

Bentinck's smile died slowly. "Ah," he said. "That's a problem. She's in Cincinnati, with friends. I'm afraid the General knew that. That's why he screwed you down on the time factor."

"You knew, too," Collier answered.

"I did," Bentinck looked genuinely hurt. "But I didn't know anything about—well, about Brooks and yourself. How can I help now?"

Collier had no idea. He didn't even know whether Brooks's resolve held. In his confusion and suspicion he hadn't exactly seized it joyfully. Would she renew it? And if she would, if there really was something significant between them, what contact *could* there be between them in the next few months? There wasn't much room for women in the mining life—in Colorado or anywhere else. The job blotted out almost everything else.

It had always been that way. In Colorado until now there had been Marie, of course, who lived in a trailer on the site and kept the field office running smoothly. She alone had rescued Collier from total celibacy. A divorcee on the run from painful suburban memories, she had never asked him for love, or even for genuine feeling. They had come together in something little more than blunt need. When he'd been recalled, he had kissed her and said goodbye as one might with a relative—and she had turned swiftly back to her work—only a little too quickly to be convincingly cool.

She was probably still there. Even if she wasn't, there was no way Brooks could come out to him. Women on site were bad news, whether wives or lovers, where duty or passion might be supposed to overcome the hardships.

It hadn't worked for him anyway. It had doomed his own marriage. Carol, at first a pretty and amiable girl, had grown distant and sullen under the strain of his long absences in the field. For a while it had been like being in the Army: separation stimulated desire. Between assignments there had been plenty of money from accumulated salary and plenty of time to spend it together. There had been idyllic holidays: the Yosemite, New York; and one long tour of Europe.

When the separation had been too much for her she had come out to live with him in a trailer. But there was little or nothing for her to do in the long hours alone, and after three years of it, seeing that mining claimed his whole attention, she had packed and left. By the time their divorce was final,

Collier was working a sixteen-hour day in Mexico and hardly noticed.

Sadly, he saw himself, this past year or so, as a kind of highly-paid technical cowboy, forever roaming some new wilderness. When he shaved he peered now at a face weathered by long exposure in extremes of climate. Deep lines radiated from the corners of his eyes, the result of years of squinting into sun and dust. He had money in the bank, of course. A good deal of money. And a satisfying portfolio of investments. But what else?

He roused himself. Bentinck was waiting patiently for an answer.

"Get me on a flight to Cincinnati," Collier said.

Bentinck smiled. "Only thing is, before you do that, you need to spend some time with me on what you need on Dirk's next spring." He put a hand on Collier's shoulder. "I'm afraid he's outboxed you on this one," he said kindly. "But anything else I can do for you on the Brooks thing . . ."

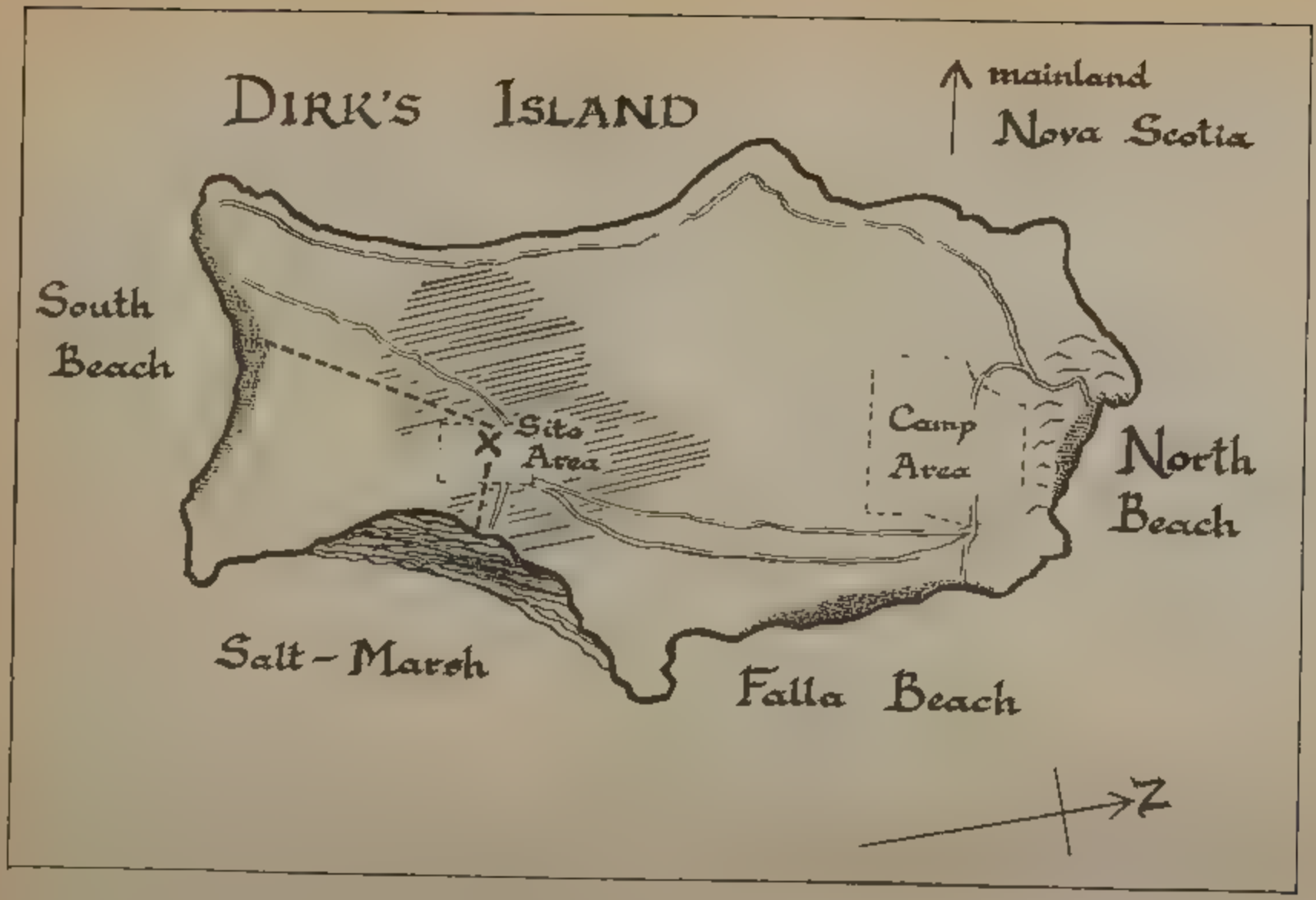
Collier stepped away. "Forget it," he said coldly. "When do you want to start work?"

He told himself it would be easier to write to Brooks anyway. One letter. It would be a difficult and oblique affair. It would say, more or less, *I'll be there on Dirk's if you are*.

After that it was up to her.

PART TWO

DIRK'S ISLAND


DIRK'S ISLAND
mainland
Nova Scotia
South
Beach
X
Site
Area
Camp
Area
North
Beach
Salt-Marsh
Falla Beach
N

6

The old landing craft, thrashing through a heavy, grey sea swell, emerged from behind a blanket of sea mist into bright mid-morning sunlight. And there it was: Dirk's Island, riding startlingly green and brown, with a white strip of beach dead ahead, less than a mile off.

Collier, sitting up on the driving seat of a big, bright-yellow loader-dumper lashed behind the bow ramp, watched their approach with wry amusement. It was like some assault out of World War II: the landing craft, the island target, a general on the bridge behind him; even the dumper might be some arcane engine of war.

Behind them the fog closed in theatrically. The mother ship, Bowman's dramatic and luxuriously converted freighter, was already invisible.

Collier was relieved to be off the *Mulberry Hill*. They had been fed and quartered in style, but it had been uncomfortable being reunited with Brooks in such close confinement and under Bowman's eye. He was impatient to be ashore.

There was a yell of laughter from the tiny bridge. Someone called his name. He lifted a hand in acknowledgement, but stayed where he was. They would all have to come down in a minute or two anyway, all the VIPs who had been brought out to lead Bowman's adventure.

The landing craft dug its bow into the swell and shuddered round a little to port. Someone on the beach was waving at them, but he couldn't see who. Bentinck, perhaps . . .

More shouts from the bridge. The labouring diesels dropped in pitch and steadied. Collier jumped down, grudgingly conceding a certain excitement. He sensed someone at his elbow and found himself smiling at Maureen Keyes, the geologist.

She squinted at him in her unfeminine way, her curly hair blowing forward round her face. "I suppose you've done this before," she said. "Stormed up some beach from a landing craft."

"Nice try, Miss Keyes. But I was too young for Korea, too old for Nam."

"Maureen," she corrected.

Collier was intent on the beach. With five hundred yards to go it looked like Bentinck there, hands on hips. He groaned silently. What the hell use was Bowman's errand boy going to be?

They were all coming down from the bridge now, Bowman in the lead, the rest following like a court attendance on a petty king: Clayton, Bowman's tame doctor; Borden Hillier; Judd Wilkie, who was going to boss the work gangs. At least Wilkie seemed a good man. Collier knew of him vaguely by reputation and liked the rough, tough look of him instinctively.

It *was* Bentinck on the beach, waving. He stared back, reminding himself that Bentinck was not only Bowman's lackey but in all probability simply there to report directly to Bowman on progress, foul-ups or anything else.

Two *Mulberry Hill* crew men, in lettered, damson-coloured sweaters, came forward to handle the ramp. The diesels dropped to 'ahead slow'.

Bowman drew level with Collier. The bright, unwinking eyes fixed on a point just above Collier's sternum. "There's your island," he said expansively. "Collier's Kingdom. I'll be back when you've cracked the problem."

With impressive timing, Bowman's personal helicopter swirled overhead and began to settle on the flat ground at the south-west end of the island.

Borden Hillier caught Collier's eye and gave him a neutral, passing nod.

The ramp crashed down. Bowman stepped smartly on to the dry sand and strode off, Hillier following a yard or two behind. A Jeep Waggoneer waited for them at the head of the beach.

Bentinck, ignored by Bowman and Hillier, looked after

them ruefully a moment and then came forward, smiling. He held out his hand and Collier took it briefly. "I think you're going to be pleased," he said. "Everything you wanted is here, just as you ordered."

It was difficult to relate this Bentinck to the one Collier had met in New York in the fall. The Dirk's Island version was slimmer, fitter looking and even seemed younger. The steady wind off the Atlantic had routed his executive pallor and he wore repressed excitement like a badge.

"Everything?" Collier scowled. He regretted Bentinck's transformation. It would have been easier to dislike the executive smoothie.

Bentinck's enthusiasm and pleasure were undented. "That's the last item—the dumper coming off now."

The beach began to swarm with men Collier didn't know. He turned back to lift a hand to Loftus, the master of the *Mulberry Hill*, who was already preparing to back the landing craft off the beach. Brooks was coming up with Maureen Keyes. The dumper roared past.

Collier followed Bentinck with some reluctance. He desperately wanted to talk to Brooks as soon as they could be alone, but the time wasn't right.

The Jeep was bouncing across the island to the helicopter.

"You've got the chopper pad up there?" he asked.

"We've got everything," Bentinck promised warmly. "Come and look."

He led the way to the top of a small rise about three hundred yards from the beach. The wind stiffened ferociously as they climbed.

"Over there are the camp, the stores, the radio shack, fuel dumps and transport park. You can see we've got the camp in a bit of a hollow, so we get less of the wind. Over there, the helicopter pad—"

"Why so far from the camp?"

"Bird nesting grounds at this end of the island. The Lands and Forests Department of the provincial government made it a condition of the lease—no extra disturbance this end. But the distance is no problem. We've got plenty of transport."

"How far to the mainland coast?"

Bentinck turned to squint at the choppy water and the flat mainland outline. "Three miles across that channel. Too far to swim, the water's cold as ice and the tides are prodigious." He turned back to the fog-laden Atlantic: "Anyway, that's the way we're oriented. That's the way the chopper comes in and that's where the *Hill* can best lighter off our supplies."

"So our hole in the ground," Collier turned to his right, "is somewhere down there."

Bentinck pointed to a line of stunted pines. "About halfway between the trees there and the bald patch with no vegetation."

The helicopter lifted suddenly, delicate as a dragon-fly, and climbed swiftly into a cobalt sky.

"Okay, thanks for the map. Now let's see your camp and equipment." Collier set off briskly. Now that he was ashore and had to do the job anyway, he was eager to start cutting ground.

As they came up on the small plateau, a beautifully ordered street of cabins spread out ahead. Collier was expecting the camp he'd seen on the model, but was still astonished. "I may have to take all this seriously," he said, trying to sound nonchalant.

Bentinck smiled, pleased. "Ritson and the two work crews put it all together in one month. That's Ritson over there." He pointed at a short, hard-looking man who was directing the unloading of the flat-bed truck which had brought the luggage up from the beach. Beyond, a bunch of people, Wilkie at the centre, were standing about shaking hands, talking, laughing and looking at the cabins like kids newly arrived at summer camp.

In the middle of the group, momentarily alone, Brooks stood aloof, clearly waiting for him. She watched them as they approached, seeming to draw them down along the line of her gaze.

She kissed Bentinck's cheek, embracing him eagerly. Over his shoulder she looked steadily at Collier, her eyes shining.

Collier exulted. He didn't grudge the warmth of her feeling for Bentinck. A new sense of energy and competence gripped him. He found he was grinning foolishly. "Well Godsake,"

he said. "Let's get Brooks squared away somewhere and get this thing moving."

"No need," Brooks said cheerfully. "I know where I go." She turned and walked up the street, her step and bearing as light as if she were shopping at Macy's.

Wilkie had rolled across the street from his cabin. "Nice looking lady, that. Listen, this place is Alcatraz. You know what?" He bared two rows of melon-seed teeth at them. "You guys give the word and we'll have whatever it is up out of the ground in a coupla weeks. Then we can take it easy. The weather is supposed to get better any time now. At least we can lie around the beach grabbing a suntan, right?"

Collier was diverted. He punched Wilkie's left bicep. "Right. If I don't get two weeks in the sun before Bowman gets wind it's all over, you're responsible. Okay?"

"Sun?" Bentinck scoffed. "Never heard of here. And wait until you've spent a night in one of these huts."

Wilkie was contemptuous. "Cold, you reckon? Sonny, you ever spent a winter night in Colorado?" He appealed to Collier. "Tell this kid about Colorado."

"It's cold," Collier assured Bentinck.

He might have said something excruciatingly funny. Wilkie roared with laughter and weaved off, shaking his head.

Left alone with Bentinck, Collier unbent sufficiently to ask, "Why do you suppose Bowman let Brooks come along?"

Bentinck looked surprised. "Why? You twisted his arm, remember?"

"But why did he let me twist it?"

Bentinck took the point. "Ah, well, there is that." He shrugged, too elaborately. "My guess is he asked Brooks to become the second Mrs Bowman and she refused."

"What?" Collier was incredulous. It hadn't ever occurred to him that Bowman's interest in Brooks might be genuine. He recalled now that he had read something about the first Mrs Bowman. From a fine old southern family, she had lived always in Bowman's shadow and died from cancer in the early seventies.

"Why not?" Bentinck said. "He's not *so* old. And even ageing military men have their urges. Mistress of Old

Burlington? It must at least have caused her to think twice." He forced a rising note. "Anyway, it isn't anything to get in the way now."

They walked on, Collier preoccupied. He wondered if Brooks really had thought twice before turning down the chance of becoming, as Bentinck put it, Mistress of Old Burlington—the five-hundred-acre pre-Civil War home of the Bowmans, overlooking the James River. And if it was true that she had turned Bowman down, had she done it because she didn't like Bowman enough, or because even after one meeting she liked Collier too well? He somehow couldn't picture the infinitely candid Brooks adapting to that other Bowman tradition of Old Virginian pretensions.

Collier was reluctantly impressed all over again when he stepped into the mess hall half an hour later. He had come ashore full of scepticism about Bowman's and Bentinck's efficiency. Looking around now, it irked him to admit that someone had done a great job. The place was big enough to feed half a company of troops, well laid out and well equipped. The food looked good, too He served himself with salad and pork-and-pineapple kebabs at a counter supervised by two cooks in whites.

He saw Jake Ritson eating alone and took his tray across.

It took him only two minutes to decide he liked Ritson. A spare, quick man, who managed to look dapper even in denim overalls, he was in charge of all supplies and equipment. He spoke fast but softly, and persistently called Collier 'sport', diminishing the familiarity with a pleasing grin.

Neither Maureen Keyes nor Brooks appeared for lunch, but the doctor, Clayton, was talking earnestly with Bentinck. Collier found the medic's presence odd. The man could hardly have wished an island exile on himself, so what had he done to earn Bowman's displeasure?

When he finished eating, Collier walked over to them. Clayton at once sat back, watchful and reserved. He'd been that way on board the *Hill*.

"I thought we'd take a first walk over the ground," Collier

told Bentinck. "I'd like Ritson and Wilkie along. Miss Keyes, too, I suppose."

Half an hour later they were traversing the rough brush, picking out separate tracks across the uneven ground for the heavy equipment and for the crew trucks and supplies. The big plant, Collier explained, would rough up the ground, leaving a potential quagmire in wet weather, impassable by the lighter trucks.

He was surprised to find the site neatly marked out with field cones.

"That's where we think it is," said Bentinck, indicating a red cone in the centre of the site. "If there's nothing under here, then it isn't anywhere. The General's information was very precise. If we find that there's a shaft that does go down to something, we'll have achieved at once what all the work on Oak never did."

"Oh sure," Collier said drily. "And it's only two hundred feet down. Which explains why one of the world's largest mining corporations sends out fifty men and a boatload of equipment and builds us a kibbutz to spend the summer in."

At this point, about two-thirds of the way down the island, the ground was at its lowest above sea level. The saucer-like depression of the alleged shaft actually did look like settlement over an area which had been deeply dug. Or was that just Berry's carefully prepared bait for a rich nut?

The ground sloped gently to the incoming tide. Marram grass had grabbed a toehold here and there. The soil looked poor, salt-laden and wind-thrashed. In bad weather, Collier reasoned, the tide might well reach to where they stood. Had a giant tide at one time come all the way up and over, causing the settlement in an old shaft? He smiled at the idea that he was beginning to look for proof of something he didn't believe in.

Warmed by the now departed sun, the ground gave off a salty, brackish odour which would have been overwhelming without the rising wind.

"This is it, then?" he said moodily.

Bentinck nodded.

"Aztec gold and all that?"

"That's right," Bentinck smiled.

Collier rolled his eyes. "Miss Keyes? What do you make of it?"

Maureen Keyes raked her fingers through her short hair. "Well, the maps say all this coast is Ordovician." She shrugged. "A two-hundred-foot dig ought not to be difficult anyway. But if that really is a shaft, dug out in the last five hundred years, well, two hundred feet of excavation would be a picnic. Disturbed ground—the drills will eat through it."

"Maybe," Collier said sceptically. He made up his mind. "Before we lift a foot of soil I want samples. Right to the two-hundred-foot mark. And beyond if we don't hit anything first." He glanced at Ritson and Wilkie. "And that can start first thing in the morning"

"Right," Wilkie said eagerly. "I'll be ready. I want off this asshole place—sorry, Miss Keyes—and quick. You want to start drilling samples tomorrow, we'll get a rig up before dark."

Ritson asked what would be needed. Collier reeled it off.

"A tripod derrick at the back of the cone, just here. There should be a drill that fits to a low skid-frame. Let's get that in under the derrick and I'll work out the rest with Wilkie. We'll do the whole thing straight, no corner-cutting. In the end it will save time."

Ritson nodded. "Flush pump, pipe and core barrels for a first day's work." He looked at Maureen Keyes. "Three-inch?" She nodded.

"If it saves time," Wilkie said, "I'll go across with Jake here and pull out what we need. My guys can work until dark on the set-up. We'll be ready to spud in whenever you give the word."

Collier was satisfied. "One other thing. Are there any spare huts?"

"Two," Ritson said.

"Get one shifted over here then as a weather shelter."

"And stick some booze in it," Wilkie said. He turned to Collier, his meaty features screwed into a scowl. "Between

you and me I think this whole thing is a load of muleshit. While I'm horsing around up here I got a bunch of guys goofing off down in the Shoeshone country can't find their own ass if I don't kick it first. Can we kill this one fast?"

"If it doesn't kill us," Collier said cheerfully.

7

Collier was finding it difficult to shake off a sense of unreality. He had looked again at the site, toured the camp twice, asked questions and given the right orders, but still couldn't quite accept that that was the Atlantic out there, scouring the cliffs and beaches on every side of him. And however much Bowman believed in it, the operation still seemed absurd.

The cabin was a two-man unit, furnished for one. Bentinck, Wilkie, Clayton, Maureen Keyes and Brooks all had the same. Everyone else shared.

He had a good bed, closets, a shower, chemical toilet and power from a generator at the back of the supply sheds. The floor was carpeted in a practical light-mud colour and the windows were curtained. There was a light over the bed and another by the two armchairs. Bentinck seemed to have thought of everything.

Collier sat down on the bed, restless and anxious. After a time he lay back. In a moment or two he slept.

The wild, continuous blare of a horn blasted him awake. He looked at his watch. It was six and he'd been asleep an hour.

A truck, the horn held down, roared up off the track and skidded to a halt in the street outside.

The wind had risen fiercely. It scoured the lines of cabins now, producing a continuous whine.

He thought he heard Wilkie shouting, but the words were whipped away on the wind. He was halfway to the door when the big man put his head in.

"Trouble!" he announced. "I think I got one dead body on the truck here. Maybe the doc can do something if I ever find him." He withdrew abruptly.

Collier hurried out. Doors were opening on both sides of the street of cabins. "Doctor!" Wilkie shouted. "Goddam Clayton, for Christ's sake!" He shoved a fist into the cab of the truck and blasted the horn again.

Bentinck, Ritson and Terrill, the camp master, appeared on the run.

A man lay on his side on the flat bed of the truck. His eyes, partly opened, were rolled up to the whites. The skin of his face was oddly blotched. Dark hair, fine and long, streamed in the wind. Collier climbed up, but Ritson was there before him, thrusting a hand in under the man's shirt. Maddened by the horn, Ritson hammered on the roof for silence. In the hush, he bent again, briefly. He looked up at Collier and shook his head.

Wilkie glared at him angrily. "We gotta be sure. The doc might do something."

"Not for this one, sport."

"Who is he?" Collier wanted to know.

"Name's Durrant," Wilkie growled. "Damnedest thing I ever saw. Stupid goddam accident. Coulda been the wind. He was up—"

"Okay, save it," Collier ordered. "Get him over to the workshop. Put him on a bench. I'll find Clayton." He jumped down and moved quickly down the cabins, throwing open the doors. Ritson was doing the same on the other side of the street.

He found Clayton in the last cabin, the one assigned to Brooks. She was sitting on the bed. Clayton, in the armchair, was in the middle of an anecdote. He at first affected not to notice Collier's abrupt entry or the ferocious draught that swept the room. Then he gave a start of surprise. "Ah," he said. "Our leader."

Collier had not liked Clayton much aboard the *Mulberry*

Hill. The man had adopted the attitude of a tourist who has been quaintly shanghai'd by some practical joke which he was determined to take in good part.

"Get your ass over to the workshop, Clayton," Collier said coldly. "There's a man either dying or dead over there who has need of you."

Clayton opened his mouth, perhaps to protest, changed his mind and hurried out. Collier, following, was propelled across the open space between the cabins and the workshop by a full gale.

Durrant's body, covered by a blanket, lay on a trestle table. "No chance," Clayton announced. "He was probably dead by the time they cut him down. His neck is broken."

"Down?" Collier was puzzled but it could wait. He thought for a moment, then ordered the other spare cabin brought to the end of the street for use as Clayton's surgery. Next, he directed Ritson and Terrill to install a bell in every cabin, shed, store and workshop to be operated by a duty man in the radio shack.

"And I want a walkie-talkie man on every shift out at the site. Anything like this happens again, Doctor Clayton, there may not be time to come looking for you. So when the alarm goes, you grab any truck at this end and get the hell out there fast. Jake, take all the men you need. Nobody works out at the site until this is operating, okay?"

He turned to Bentinck. "Everyone in the mess hall after chow tonight. Everyone. Talk to them. Make sure everyone knows exactly what happened and what's been set up."

Bentinck nodded sombrely, then said, "Meanwhile, we need the helicopter back for Durrant."

Collier shook his head. "That wind is way past chopper conditions. But the *Mulberry Hill* could get here. If they were offshore by, say, daylight, Durrant could be in the right hands by tomorrow afternoon. I don't want him here spooking things up."

"Okay," Bentinck said. "I'll go talk to Ferris and get him to raise them now."

Satisfied that he'd done all he could, Collier turned to go.

"A word, please," Clayton said tightly.

Collier waited.

"I appreciate that what happened here is a bad start for you. I make allowance that a man has been killed and that might have rattled you. But I very much resent the manner in which I was spoken to just now." Clayton ducked his head. "I say no more than that."

Collier glared. "Say what you goddam please, Doctor. You were not called in. You *are* in. You're here to do a full-time job like everyone else. More. Because you're the doctor you'll consider yourself on call twenty-four hours a day. You'll do what you're supposed to do and do it good, whether I call you Doctor Clayton or Mickey Mouse. Okay?"

Clayton's cheeks flamed. "Bowman will hear of this," he growled. But Collier had already turned his attention to Wilkie, who had been standing off to one side, dejectedly.

"Okay. How did it happen?"

"Damnedest thing I ever saw. We got the tripod up and Durrant went up the ladder section to rig the sheeve. He'd got the winch cable through the sheeve and tied off with one end of a long line. The rest of the line he's got over his shoulder, right? To bring it down and pull the winch cable down with it? Jesus Christ, we've all seen it done a hundred times, no trouble, safe as humping the old lady." He pulled in a long breath. "Right. He steps round the ladder section and on to the top brace, reaches up, hangs the sheeve by the hook, gives it a shake and a rattle to check, let's go and—" Wilkie shrugged uncomprehending. "The rest was unbelievable. Maybe his foot slipped. Maybe the wind caught him off balance. Next thing he'd toppled off, lost his footing, the line over his right shoulder and under his left arm. Nine times out of ten if he'd dropped to the end of the line like that the worst he'd have got was a sore shoulder. This time"—he held his hands out, palms upwards— "he fetches up with the line snagged under his chin. A hangman couldn't have done a better job, poor bastard." He rubbed his meaty face all over with a huge hand, erasing the memory of it. "He's insured, I hope?"

"We all are," Collier said. "Double. I insisted on it."

■

When he knocked on Brooks's door she opened it as if she had been waiting behind it. She took his hand and led him into the cabin and they stood there, smiling uncertainly.

Conversation had been impossible aboard the *Mulberry Hill* during the short sea journey, not least because of Bowman's benign and faultless courtesy to them both. Their only other contact had been in letters. Collier had written several times from Colorado, one of them a long, rambling affair in which he had attempted to express the sterility of life in the field and the way in which it atrophied the spirit and abraded almost any relationship. He'd told her, too, about his hope for a new way of life through the other condition he'd imposed on Bowman - taking Kelso's chair.

Brooks had written back warmly, sympathetically and at length. In response to Collier's one allusion to the night they'd walked together in New York, she had written,

> "With you" or "along for the ride" has to be for you to decide. But we are both looking for a new beginning, and on the island, who knows? we might find one—perhaps the same one.

Her letter was postmarked Cincinnati, where she had stayed until after Thanksgiving before moving on to spend the winter with other friends in Escondido, and Collier had been delighted not only with what he saw as a promising response but with the fact that it was written after she had already been months away from the harassment of New York. He had been content with that. Brooks was already taking the long view, and that was good. He wanted no impulsive decisions, no fast-moving entanglement while Dirk's Island yawned ahead like a chasm between them and the resumption of normal life.

Now Brooks laughed, dispelling the awkwardness. She put her arms around him in an embrace both friendly and compassionate.

"Oh, I think we can do better than that," Collier said. He kissed her softly. There was more promise than passion in the kiss, and again Collier was delighted.

"Now," he said, "I'd like to get Durrant off the island, make sure that the *Hill* is out there somewhere and that we aren't marooned here—"

"And then?"

"Come back." —

"What else," she said, and hugged him, satisfied.

8

The wind dropped during the night. Bentinck, waking before first light, held his breath, listening uneasily in the darkness of his cabin. Finally, he caught the faint crash of breakers on the beach below. Otherwise it was almost desert-quiet.

He'd slept deeply, unaccountably tired. Even now the timber-scented warmth of the cabin urged him back to sleep. He sat up, resolutely. If the weather held and the emergency alarm had been rigged, drilling would start in a few hours. It would be useful if he got the radio shack to demand a daily weather forecast for the whole coastline from the *Mulberry Hill*. When they finally got through, that was. They had called the freighter at ten-minute intervals throughout the evening. Failing to evoke a response they checked the radio again and again.

The freighter's silence had infuriated Collier. "It's just possible," Bentinck offered, "that they haven't begun a regular watch—perhaps weren't expecting anything from us just yet." Durrant's body, now lying in the new shack at the landward end of the row, seemed to distress Collier inordinately, though he had obviously had to endure fatal accidents in so many years of mining.

Bentinck got up and opened his door. A floodlight mounted on the main store illuminated most of the camp. He found a coat and boots and walked quietly across to the lighted radio

shack. Only a light breeze blew now from the sea. The stars glittered brightly in an oddly purplish pre-dawn sky

Ferris, the radio man, looked up wearily, shaking his head.

"Get your head down for a while then," Bentinck advised. "Try again about eight. Maybe that's what they have in mind—a daylight watch." He arranged that Ferris would ask for a daily weather report. "That's the one way we'll know they're there," he said.

There was still no response after breakfast when Collier came jolting out to the site on a truck carrying diesel drums.

"You screwed up on communications," he snarled at Bentinck. "If they don't answer in the next few hours I'll bypass Bowman and cut in on the citizens-band on the mainland, get someone there to call Kelso in New York for us urgently."

"Dirk's Island is supposed to be—well, secret," Bentinck reminded him.

"Tough," Collier snapped. "I want Durrant off this island if we have to build a raft and float him to the mainland."

The site was beginning to hum with activity. Wilkie was watching Kovak, the driller, like an anxious parent. As the first 'return trip' was completed and the rig withdrawn, the big work-boss ambled round the tripod to join them. Over the din he bellowed, "It's fast. Very fast. Maybe the ol' General was right. It's been dug and filled."

"So it's old Berry's latrine," Collier said indifferently. "I'll put my money down when we've had a look at the first hundred feet. You got everything you need here?"

Bentinck, listening, was relieved when Wilkie nodded. He borrowed gloves and lent a hand unloading the diesel drums with two more of Wilkie's men. He felt fit and workmanlike and hoped Collier would notice that he was no longer the pink-and-white kid he had encountered in New York.

Collier was the first to see the helicopter. It was already banking steeply overhead before the sound of the blades cut through the roar of the drilling diesel. Bentinck caught Collier's eye and held up a triumphant thumb. Ferris had evidently got through after all.

A moment later the big security Jeep bounded up from the dunes below, passed them and surged across the rough delta, following the helicopter's line of flight.

Collier and Bentinck exchanged glances of bafflement, then sprinted across to the now empty truck.

There were no tracks across this end of the island, but the big Dodge muscled its way easily through heavy brush Ahead of them the helicopter was settling behind a screen of gawky pines, the pilot ignoring the well-marked landing pad two hundred yards farther west.

As Bentinck and Collier arrived, two burly BBMC security men waited, hands on hips, at the periphery of the dying blades.

The bright green helicopter bore no markings other than the registration.

The door opened and a tall, raw-boned man with reddish hair dropped lightly to the ground. He came forward, smiling broadly. "Torrance," he said. "Press." He held up a card.

"No visitors," one of the security men said curtly. "And especially no press." This was Ambruzzi, chief of the security team recruited by Bowman-Brace. He wore the standard BBMC security outfit, almost indistinguishable from blue Air Force uniforms. He was a short, stout, powerful-looking man of about fifty, his face a seamed bean-bag with a texture like oatmeal. It was a shapeless, unexceptional face, with tired eyes that looked as if it was used to some unadventurous sedentary job like stage-door keeper. And yet he looked a hard man, Bentinck thought.

Torrance smiled. "Oh?" He advanced a little farther. "There's a rumour you got an Oak Island-style excavation going on here. That right?" He said it with engaging, boyish innocence.

"No answers, either," Ambruzzi said heavily. "Get back in the chopper."

"Ah," Torrance said. He glanced at the Jeep. "That's the Bowman-Brace insignia, isn't it? Now what would a big outfit like BBMC want on a tiny island like this?" he mused. He seemed now to notice Collier and Bentinck and turned to them as if they might be more hospitable. "No minerals to

speak of," he said. "Not big enough to warrant BBMC time and trouble—"

"Okay, okay," the other guard cut in. "That's it. Back in the chopper now, nice and easy."

Torrance stopped smiling. He took a deep breath and said seriously, "It could be argued that the Canadian public is entitled to know what goes on here."

"Tough," Ambruzzi said.

"For all I know," Torrance persisted, "BBMC is mounting something nasty here, something offensive to Canadian opinion. Now once you give the environment freaks something to worry about, or the bird loonies, or the marine nutters, and you'll have the whole lot swarming all over this place like day-trippers in Disneyland."

"It's a point," Collier murmured to Bentinck. "Hold it!" he ordered Ambruzzi.

"Move!" the other guard said harshly. He might not have heard Collier.

"Much better they should know what's going on," Torrance argued. "Then I won't have to worry on their behalf and you won't be troubled."

"Trouble is what we're here to prevent," Ambruzzi said nastily. "Now, shove off, kid."

"I said hold it!" Collier shouted, stepping forward.

Torrance turned to appeal to Collier, but watched the guards warily. "This is Canada, not Texas," he complained.

"Take it up with Nova Scotia Lands and Forests," Ambruzzi said brusquely. "We have a lease on the whole island, exclusive." He ignored Collier's protest.

"I'll look into it," Torrance promised. "If that's what you want—publicity."

Again Collier would have intervened, but Bentinck caught his arm. "Bowman's problem, not yours," he murmured.

Both guards now advanced on Torrance, who affected disbelief. "Bluff," he said cheerfully. "You'll hardly lay hands on a Canadian pressman—on Canadian soil. Brother, would that win you trouble!"

Ambruzzi yanked the helicopter door open. The pilot watched, horrified, as both guards grabbed Torrance and

bundled him aboard. They slammed the door. Enraged, the newsman shouted something inaudible. Open-mouthed he watched as Ambruzzi's partner drew a .38 police special and motioned menacingly. The pilot didn't have Torrance's courage. At once the blades began to turn.

Collier seethed. He was angry with Ambruzzi and angry at his own hesitation. "That may not be the best thing you did this week," he shouted over the racket of the helicopter's lift-off.

Ambruzzi looked at him indifferently, his pale blue eyes expressionless. "I got orders," he said.

"Whose orders?"

"General Bowman is who."

"On this island," Collier gritted, "I give all the orders."

Ambruzzi motioned his partner back into the Jeep. "No, sir, you don't. Not to the security force anyway." He turned his back on Collier and in a moment the Jeep jounced away to the west.

Collier watched the helicopter drift across the three-mile strait. He said nothing. Bentinck was silent, too, surprised by Ambruzzi's revelation and puzzled by Bowman's order. Only later did he realise that his silence could be taken by Collier as evidence of complicity in whatever Bowman and his powerful right arm, Hillier, had in mind.

For the moment the incident was forgotten in Maureen Keyes's excitement. She waved the truck down as they drove back into the site area.

"There it is!" she shouted triumphantly. She opened her hands to reveal a black-brown sticky mess. "Substantial traces of pitch, timber and some kind of fibre." She beckoned them to the yield from the first thirty feet of drilling, now transferred to her precious core sample boxes. Gloating over it, she said, "A first layer almost exactly like they found on Oak. The wood is obviously from some kind of platform and the pitch was to preserve it. It *is* a shaft."

Her excitement made her look almost pretty, Bentinck thought. For the moment he forgot his mild antipathy for the geologist. He smiled and watched Collier.

"What about the fibre?" Collier mocked. "No theories?"

"Well, on Oak some kind of fibre had been used to block the inlets to the water traps on the beaches, like corks in a series of bottles," she said seriously. "The idea was it swelled up when it was wet and stoppered the tunnel mouths while they worked in the shaft. Then, later, it rotted, got scoured out by the sea-water and that opened the traps, re-setting them. Isn't that right?"

"But this is a shaft, you said. Not a water trap," Collier reminded her.

She looked nonplussed. "Okay, they had some left and threw it down the shaft. How's that?"

"Those ol' Aztecs, that is?" Collier smiled.

"Well, somebody dug the damn tunnels," she said irritably.

"Fine. On Oak they did. Let's agree that. What's the rest of the sample." Collier could read the samples for himself, but it diverted her neatly.

"Sand, clay, light soil, fragmented rock. Typical spoil, in fact." She frowned at him. "It's worked-over spoil, you can't gainsay that. It is a shaft that's been filled. So who dug it—on this Godforsaken place?"

Collier acknowledged with a lift of his hand that it was a valid question. He was not, Bentinck saw, going to point out that thirty feet of filling, if filling it was, hardly justified much excitement. Berry himself might have worked the shaft, or what he thought was a shaft, to a depth of thirty feet. He flushed, suddenly, with the realisation that he did not know whether Berry had done anything of the kind and that he was lucky that Bowman had never asked him how much work Berry had put into his find.

It looked as though Collier was prepared to let Maureen Keyes keep her excitement. Perhaps he thought that he could use all the enthusiasm he could get. Certainly it was not the moment to remind her, or anyone else, that Oak Island had yielded far greater evidence of man-made workings but still had to produce an ounce of gold, a single item of treasure or anything else that was worth all the years of work and loss of life.

Maureen Keyes had turned away, sulkily, already busy

logging details of what the cores revealed, foot by foot, in her field notebook.

Later, coming up from the beach, Collier saw Brooks strolling with Jake Ritson on the high ground immediately above the camp, her hair blowing back, loose in the salt breeze. He felt a stab of jealousy, then reminded himself sharply that she had to talk to someone. So far he wasn't providing her even with that.

He turned away to the horizon, hopeful for sign of the *Hill*. But then if the freighter had been within sight she should be answering the insistent calls from the radio shack. Either the crew were still not standing a radio watch or the ship was outside the range of the camp's low-power UHF equipment, designed to reach about thirty miles, as far as the freighter's berth at Halifax.

A life-and-death call to some mainland UHF user, drawing attention to a drama on the island, would be just what Bowman was anxious to avoid, Collier brooded. But that's what he'd do if there wasn't a response soon. He walked on into the camp, looking for a ride out to the site. Terrill fell into step beside him.

"Nothing from the ship yet," the camp master said.

"We'll give it till nightfall," Collier said tersely.

"Then what?" Terrill, it seemed, rarely smiled. He was competent and his loose-limbed, defeated-looking frame was constantly on the move about the camp, but his joyless manner made him an unlikely recruit for the job. Where had Bowman found him?

"Break into some citizen-band transmission and get someone to call New York."

"Simple as that?" Terrill looked almost disappointed.

"Why not?"

Terrill pursed meaty, purplish lips. "If you say so, but it's hardly goin' to help with the mainland vultures. I hear there was somebody out in a chopper already, tryin' to find out who got killed."

Collier halted annoyed. "How could anyone have heard that?"

Terrill shrugged. "You think it's a coincidence? We get

our first death and straight away this guy drops in to sniff around?"

"Cut out that *first* death stuff," Collier snapped. "Durrant was just a piece of bad luck."

"If that's for openers," said Terrill, "who needs the rest of the script." He saw Collier's face and added hastily, "Listen, I got the alarms all working everywhere. You want to see a demonstration?"

"Later," Collier growled.

By six there was still no response from what Bowman had been pleased to call the 'command ship'.

Collier stood in line for his meal in the mess hall and was a little cheered to see that Brooks, waving, had kept a place for him at her table. As he sat down, smiling his pleasure at seeing her, Ambruzzi came in with the youngest of his men, the one called Luther, a shambling heavyweight with a Neanderthal hairline and a malign expression.

"Hold my place for me," Collier said. He crossed to the counter and leaned across in front of Ambruzzi, grabbing the wrist of the cook who was about to fill a plate for the security man. "You know me?" he demanded.

"Sure," the young cook said, startled. "You're the boss."

"Right," Collier said grimly. "And you don't serve food to any of the security men. That's the guys in this blue uniform, okay?"

The cook looked bewildered. Ambruzzi, on Collier's left, rolled his big head, shaking off annoyance. "C'mon, son, fill the plate. The guy don't mean it." He smiled thinly, his eyes almost closed.

"No food. Nothing," Collier ordered. He turned to Ambruzzi. "Who gives the orders on this island?"

"Why, you do, son. Well, mostly." Ambruzzi chuckled amiably. "Now quit foolin' around. Here"—he held out a plate to the cook, his eyes on Collier— "fill it!"

Collier shook his head. "Stand away from the food," he told the counterman. He looked at Ambruzzi. "We got one operation here, one team, one kind of people, and one boss. You take orders like the rest or you're on your own."

The room fell silent. Bentinck appeared unhappily behind Collier, and Wilkie to his right.

But the first move was made by Ambruzzi's man, Luther. He let out an unintelligible sound and stepping round Ambruzzi drew his .38 revolver. He pointed it at the cook. "Fill the man's plate," he said. He held the gun at arm's length, ignoring Collier.

Collier's temper erupted. His right hand swept up under Luther's outstretched arm, chopping ferociously at the triceps and ramming the arm up into the air. The .38 fired, drowning Luther's howl of pain. The bullet smacked harmlessly into the mess-hall roof. Collier, still moving, swung right, winding up like a ball player and lashed back again, crashing his leg into Luther's crutch. The big guard screamed on the way down and sprawled on his side, clutching his groin.

At that moment, Bentinck, surprising himself, stepped forward, unbuttoned Ambruzzi's holster and disarmed him.

Wilkie let out a delighted whoop. "Chrissakes, it's like a goddam movie. The goddam Earp brothers." He caught at Collier's shoulder. "Hey, let's go get the other four mothers. They got guns, too."

"You can't do your job this way," Collier told Ambruzzi reasonably. "There are your five boys and there's all of us. No way you can win. Now why don't you come on over to our side?"

Ambruzzi considered it a moment, chewing his lips. Then his shapeless features split and he laughed, a short breathy sound like a panting dog. "Why not? Only a goddam fool follows orders right into trouble." He held out his hand, without looking at Bentinck, and Bentinck slapped the .38 into it. Ambruzzi laughed some more.

Collier beamed and took Ambruzzi's arm. "Have you met Miss Remsen? Come on over here." He looked back at the dazed counterman. "Bring Mr. Ambruzzi some chow over here, will you, kid?"

Ambruzzi, still laughing, stepped over the groaning Luther and sat down to his supper.

Something achieved, Collier told himself. Now if only he could get Durrant's body away and find an hour or two to

spend quietly with Brooks . . . He watched her eating, smiling, laughing, talking and felt more alone, more burdened than ever. Until she looked up, feeling his stare, and was rewarded, warmed, by the shine of her eyes.

9

On the site routine had set in The going was still soft, no problems. Collier watched impatiently. Core sampling was sensible and it would repay the trouble in the end. But it would have been more satisfying to begin excavating, digging out the shaft, if shaft it was.

The whole assembly of coring bit, core barrels and drill rod were driven to their limit, then raised, replaced and returned to the bore. In this operation Wilkie was using fresh water with a special additive as the drilling fluid for cooling and lubricating even though the light going hardly required it. The flush pump was being fed from a tank mounted on a stand-by truck.

Wilkie's crew worked quickly and smoothly. The drilling assembly came up on a wire line from the tripod derrick. The core barrel was man-handled to one side for refitting and the drilling then resumed.

Bentinck appeared at his side. "Is it a shaft?"

"No gold yet."

Bentinck ducked his head amiably.

The driller stopped the drill. The noise abated. The crew stood back, wiping their faces. The weather was warming up.

Another length of pipe was fed down into the drill head and locked. The driller dropped the lever and the drill began to revolve again.

Almost at once the pipe slid down about a foot, encountering no resistance. A pocket of air, perhaps. The driller's eye

caught the slide and he stopped the drill at once and stepped forward, his gloves around the pipe and directly under the drill head.

He had done all the right things, but then it began to go wrong.

Collier, watching closely, saw one of the team step forward to tread the foot clamp which would hold the pipe assembly safely poised in the hole; saw him stumble, saw the clamp released and the drill head crash down.

The driller screamed, his gloved hands crushed under the heavy chuck. His eyes glazed, his mouth opened and he sagged, held half-upright by his pinioned hands.

Horrified, Collier, Bentinck and four or five others scrambled in to help. The clamp went on. The assembly was raised. Released, the unconscious man fell backwards into Collier's arms in a dead faint. His heavy gloves were already obscenely seeping blood.

"Alarm!" Collier roared.

Bentinck was into the weather hut before the driller could be eased into a prone position.

Within seconds the klaxon could be heard bleating in the camp.

Wilkie shouldered forward, lifted the driller easily in his arms and carried him like a baby into the weather hut. He laid the man tenderly on the floor, ripped the jacket from the back of one of his crew and bundled it under his driller's head. "Christ," he whispered to Collier. "You see that?"

It was suddenly dark in the hut. The door was jammed full of crew. Wilkie snatched off his hard-hat and threw it at the crowd. "Get the hell out, for Chrissakes. Let's have some goddam air." He looked up at Collier again. "A simple thing like that. You ever seen that happen? You get a drill slip like that, you're on to it. It slips a foot it could be six foot or all the goddam way. You just don't take goddam chances."

The driller was still unconscious, his face yellow-white—like Durrant's, Collier thought miserably—and his mouth wide open as if in a silent scream of agony.

Wilkie's own breathing was ragged. "That guy on the

clamp. You ever see a guy foul up like that? Christ, what a fuck-up."

Collier said nothing. He watched uneasily as the man's gloved hands twitched suddenly. Two pools of blood had begun to roll through the dust on each side of him. The driller's eyelids fluttered.

"Chrissakes don't come round," Wilkie urged hoarsely. "Stay down, stay down." He glared at the doorway. "Where's that goddam doctor?"

The emergency truck tore into the site area. Clayton dropped down and came on the run. The driver at once turned the truck back towards the camp and kept the motor running.

Collier explained briefly.

"Nothing I can do here," Clayton said grim-faced. "I'll give him a shot and get him back to camp." He gave Collier a look of accusation then bent over the driller.

Collier turned away. He caught Wilkie by the arm and drew him out into the warm afternoon sunlight. "Get 'em back to work, Wilk, huh?"

Wilkie nodded. "I don't want 'em spooked." Someone handed him his hard-hat. He smacked it on to his head and made to go. "I'm sorry about this," he told Collier. "From now on " he sawed at the bridge of his nose with the edge of his gloved hand. "All I can say is . . . I never seen anything like it."

"Who is he?"

"Name's Bayliss. New to me, but a good worker. Not the careless kind. I watched him."

Collier nodded at the crew. "Talk to them later. And don't let the guy on the clamp get dramatic, either."

The duty man on the walkie-talkie hurried up.

"Ferris is through to the ship," he announced. "The chopper is already on the way."

Collier let out a long breath and looked for Bentinck. "Well, that's something. Only now we got two passengers. See to them getting away, will you? Come and tell me when they've gone. I'll be in the radio shack. I've got a message or two of my own for the *Mulberry Hill*."

In the shack he pushed Ferris aside and demanded to talk to the freighter's master. Loftus came on.

"Godsake," Collier shouted. "This is supposed to be an open link, round the goddam clock. Where the hell were you?"

"Probably out of range." Loftus sounded defensive and irritable. "We had our own problems – an engine repair which needed a fast sea trial to check out properly. At one point we were sixty miles up the coast. Never mind that now. Hillier wants to talk to you." He was gone before Collier could protest further.

After a long wait, Borden Hillier came on.

"I'm not satisfied with what Loftus just told me," Collier raged. "We need constant radio communication."

Hillier's silky tones were unmistakable. "So it would seem," he said drily, with the subtle tone of someone used to being treated with some deference. "This is a calamitous start to operations, Collier."

"I know it," Collier shouted. "What about the goddam radio link?"

There was a pause. Collier had the impression Hillier was checking with someone else. If so, it could not be anyone but Bowman. "Unlikely to recur," Hillier said at last. And then, "I take it this is just a run of bad luck. General Bowman isn't exactly delighted."

"Neither are Durrant and Bayliss," Collier snapped. "Replace me, why don't you? Meanwhile, keep that goddam link open."

He hurried from the shack fuming, only marginally encouraged by the appearance of the helicopter over the north end of the island, like a toy sliding down a wire stretched from the clifftop.

A further setback was the realisation he would have to send Wilkie and Clayton with Durrant and Bayliss. The work boss had been present at both accidents and his first-hand sworn accounts would be needed, along with Clayton's—by BBMC, by the insurance company covering the project and by the coroner's court. Bowman had influence everywhere and would automatically ensure that there was no fuss and as little

time-loss as possible, but here he was, almost at the start of operations, with one man dead, one badly injured and both Wilkie and the doctor lost to the site for perhaps forty-eight hours.

It occurred to him that Dirk's was beginning to demonstrate the same hostility as Oak Island. He dismissed the thought, impatient with himself, but couldn't quite recover that first unexpected lift of optimism and excitement. Durrant's death had indelibly blemished the record. Even if everything went right from here on, there would always be these two incidents to diminish the satisfaction of anything he was able to achieve.

The sun shone. But it had no real warmth. Like the way he was beginning to feel.

10

Bentinck watched Collier anxiously. It was important to his own future that the operation succeeded. If it failed, he sensed, Bowman would find some way to penalise him for it. Nor would he escape blame if Collier simply lost his nerve, rebelled or for any other reason opted out.

The two accidents certainly seemed to have rattled Collier. He had taken to touring the site, the camp and the rest of the island ceaselessly during daylight, perhaps in the belief that he could forestall trouble by being everywhere at once, checking. Bentinck had redoubled his own efforts, planning, smoothing, trying to stay one jump ahead of Collier, and thought he detected a lessening of Collier's tension when for the fourth or fifth time their paths crossed on identical errands.

Another way of keeping Collier happy on Dirk's might be to see that he got some time with Brooks. Their relationship

was at an early, vulnerable stage, Bentinck reasoned. He set about bringing them together.

He talked glowingly to Brooks about the beauty and interest of the western beach and suggested she took her walks there. Then, on the pretext of searching for water-trap inlets, he got Collier out there, too, though Collier had not yet admitted that they were drilling into anything as definite as a man-made shaft which might be trapped.

It was another mild, still morning. The Atlantic breakers which looked so menacing at a distance slapped harmlessly, soporifically on the kelp-strewn sand.

He was delighted with Collier's response and for the first time saw what attracted Brooks. The man relaxed at once, like a player who steps out of a card game to stretch and breathe deeply.

The sun was warm on their shoulders and the view from the beach contributed its own magic. For the moment, Dirk's looked like an island paradise. The silvery sand of Falla Bay stretched away for half a mile to the salt-marsh, where the coarse, spiky, spartina grass looked like a silver-green meadow. Beyond the reach of the sea-water a different variety of softer green lay flattened into swirled patterns like combed fur.

Almost a perfect day, except for the mosquitoes.

The tide line was littered with the black-brown shells of fresh quahog. Could they be eaten, Collier wanted to know.

"Certainly," Bentinck told him, delighting in knowing the answer. He felt proprietorial about Dirk's suddenly. "Look, we've also got soft-shell clams, razor clams, all kinds, in the mud flats to the south there. If you can spare a couple of men for a few hours we could feed the whole camp tonight with a sea-food supper."

Collier agreed at once and they walked on. The iodine odours of salt and dead spartina made a heady mixture. The sea was deep blue in the strong morning sunlight. For perhaps five minutes more they explored the beach debris companionably, walking south. Brooks had not appeared, but Bentinck hoped she was already moving towards them out of sight above the line of dunes.

They had covered no more than half the distance to the salt-marsh when there was a shout and an excited Maureen Keyes came puffing up behind them, wading heavily in the soft sand as if wearing weighted boots. Core samples of the first seventy-five feet, she said, were boxed and ready for Collier's inspection . . . if he could spare a minute.

Exasperated, Bentinck looked south and saw that Brooks had just appeared at the dune line, waved and turned to meet them. He was sure that Collier hadn't missed Maureen's note of reproach and knew that he would follow her over to the big store. Then he noticed that the geologist was carrying her field notebook.

"Have you got it logged?" he asked innocently.

She shot him a steely look and handed the book to Collier, disappointed.

The cores were remarkably similar to the first thirty feet. The pitch, timber and fibre had appeared again at forty-five feet and sixty feet. Otherwise there was nothing new. "You see," she said, "it is a shaft."

"Could be," Collier said mildly. Looking up he saw Brooks moving slowly towards them. Keyes saw her, too.

"I was going to ask you," Maureen said, dropping her voice, "to look in on Brooks . . ."

"Any particular reason?"

"I thought it might cheer her a bit, that's all." She looked uncomfortable, shrugging away any other motive.

"Does she complain, show any sign of strain?" Collier insisted. Bentinck, smiling, said nothing.

"Well . . . no."

What was it about Keyes that was so irritating? Bentinck wondered. She had a knack of inviting you to believe precisely the opposite of whatever she was saying.

"Well, does she or doesn't she?" Collier said sharply.

"I guess not."

"Fine."

"It's just—well, I don't believe that anywhere but on a place like this, someone like Brooks would spend time with someone like Jake Ritson."

Bentinck held his breath, taken aback by the nerve of it.

"Ritson?" Collier managed to sound both indifferent and sceptical. He squinted down the beach at Brooks, still at a distance. He turned to Bentinck. "Let's try this again tomorrow, huh?" It neatly dismissed them both and Bentinck, picking up his cue, took Maureen firmly by the arm and led her back towards the camp.

He wondered what Collier was making of Maureen Keyes's hint. Ritson? The man didn't have position, money or power, but then Brooks had been close, very close, to men with all three advantages and remained unimpressed. And perhaps Ritson had something else. Lean, dark and handsome in a tigerish sort of way, he seemed to burn with nervous power. He was obviously a hard man; a confident one, whose manner, despite the smiling civility, was sometimes close to arrogance. And if he had no particular background, Ritson nonetheless had some kind of polish. True, he was doing a tough, blue-collar job, but it wasn't difficult to imagine him performing perfectly well behind a big desk, given the chance.

He left Maureen Keyes abruptly at the approach to the camp, hoping she wouldn't go straight back to the beach. What the hell was she playing at anyway? Here was Collier, his hands full of problems, and she was seemingly trying to spook him about whether Brooks fancied a hardcase supply man.

He made for the kitchen, to discuss supplies with the cooks, and it was there that Collier found him less than an hour later.

Collier waited, listening, until Bentinck was through. "What are supplies like?"

"Not bad. But we're getting through fresh water faster than we thought. It's brought in by a tanker, aboard the landing craft. Satisfactory, we thought. But it may have to come more often than planned."

Collier looked guiltily aware that so far he hadn't given food supplies a thought, and his tone implied satisfaction that Bentinck had. "Isn't that Jake Ritson's problem, though?"

"Yours and mine, too, if we run short," Bentinck said. "Anyway, I'm watching it. That's what I'm here for."

"What is Keyes here for?" Collier demanded abruptly.

"She's the geologist."

Collier snorted derisively. "I was reading core samples when she was still in kindergarten. I need a geologist like I need two assholes."

"The instruction came from Borden Hillier . . ." Bentinck said, remembering. "I signed her on partly because I was told to and partly because I didn't know any better." He grinned. "Perhaps she's one of the Viceroy's protégées."

"With bitten fingernails?" Collier said cynically. "I don't see Keyes as love-nest material."

Bentinck looked at him in surprise over imaginary pince-nez, but Collier, in restless mood, missed it. "Tell me something today that makes some sense. You're close to Brooks—how did she get into all this?"

Drawing a long judicious breath, Bentinck said, "Simple enough. You're a beautiful girl, with breeding, natural delicacy, a fine sense of humour—and poise and education enough to make you into something rather special." He looked down at one boot, faltering, embarrassed suddenly to be discussing Brooks at all and wondering where it would lead him. "But you have no talent and no money. So what do you do when your world falls apart? Marry the guy next door and have kids and dreams?" He looked at Collier soberly. "Like hell you do. You use what you've got. And if you're found by a General Bowman you reach up. And on the way up you keep an eye open for a fast exit that you like the look of."

He looked away, afraid of what Collier's expression would be. "The trouble is, it's trickier than it sounds. You use people and find yourself being used in turn. Not a nice process. And what happens if you change your mind on the way up—before, that is, you've found a satisfactory way out? It's harder now to go down than ever it was to be down initially." He grinned, taking the edge off the solemnity of this statement. "Happens a lot . . ."

Collier nodded impatiently. "Sounds as if you tell it with personal feeling. How about you?"

Bentinck let out a short, explosive laugh. "Suppose you're a handsome lad, with breeding, natural delicacy . . ."

Collier smiled wanly. He didn't comment, but the silence was amiable. It was the closest they had been so far.

The day began to improve. Bentinck rode out to the site with Collier in the early afternoon. Drilling had reached a hundred feet, the samples still showing mixed, disturbed uniformity.

At last Collier seemed willing to accept that they were indeed drilling a man-made shaft, but held back from the assumption, logical to Bentinck, that if it was a shaft it also had a purpose and a secret.

As he walked into the mess hall that evening, Bentinck was a few steps behind Collier.

A roar of approval went up as they walked in. But the applause was not for them. Brooks had appeared from the kitchen, dressed in whites, her hair coiled under a commissary cap. She began filling plates with steak and fruit pie. The outfit was clownishly large but she looked beautiful just the same. The work crews beat on the tables, whistling and cheering.

Collier, joining the line with an enormous grin, told her, "Terrific, Brooks. Bet you wouldn't do this on Sixth Avenue."

She opened her eyes very wide, her smile warm and intimate. "You won't make me, will you?"

11

They met in a midtown bar, a plush, comfortable place as it happened. But his cabdriver, a smart-ass like the New York variety, looked Wilkie over doubtfully and suggested, "Let me take you someplace else. This one you ain't gonna suit."

"Just drive," Wilkie told him. He looked down at the way he was dressed. What the hell had the guy made out of that?

The driver shrugged and rammed back into the traffic, full of resentment.

Wilkie had no idea whom he was meeting. All he had to go on was the note left for him at his hotel, suggesting the time, the place and enclosing a hundred dollars "for cabfare". The money made him feel like a second-rate call-girl, but what the hell; he had nothing to lose. It was intriguing and it also had an encouraging whiff of corruption about it. Someone who gave away hundred-dollar bills just to see you had to have something worth a lot more on his mind. That was reason enough to put his suit on and go and find out. If he didn't like it he could always walk away, nearly a hundred better off. It was just an outside possibility that the sender was some elderly fag who had taken a fancy to him—in the hotel, perhaps. Well, he'd know what to do about that. Or it might be a woman. He hoped it was. Much more interesting.

After Wilkie paid him off, the cabbie stuck his head out of his window. "In this cab you pay for a ride, mister, but the lifetime's experience is free!"

The place looked tame enough. It was a big, L-shaped room, the lighting very discreet, the seating well spaced, full of quiet corners. For a moment he feared the worst, but a quick look round at the clientele was reassuring. Only a few people were drinking this early, but none looked either gay or the kind who were hiding an office romance. He picked a small table in the middle of the room and sat down. Even before he could catch the eye of a passing waitress, someone got up from the gloom of the far end of the room and came towards him. Wilkie watched with astonishment as his host sat down in a facing chair.

"You? I thought it was going to be a broad," Wilkie said uneasily. "A broad or a faggot." He remembered the hundred-dollar bribe and relaxed a little.

"And still you came?" the other murmured. "It says a great deal about you. However, it will make this interview simpler and more productive for both of us if you forget my name, or that we've ever met. For today's piece of business, just think of me as—Santander."

"Yeah?" Wilkie's brain raced, digesting this. He knew all about Santander Exploration from Collier and from Bowman's lunchtime harangue aboard the *Hill* on their way out to Dirk's that first day. He thought he was beginning to understand. He relaxed, feeling now on firmer ground. A waitress appeared and they both ordered.

"You're taking a hell of a risk," he said, puzzled. "They've spent months trying to figure out just who Santander really is. All they got so far is the names of a bunch of business guys who would think a forklift was some kind of jockstrap."

Wilkie's companion shook his head. "No risk is involved, Mr. Wilkie. I have a proposition for you. One that you will like. So it isn't going to be in your interest to expose me."

"Suppose I'm loyal to Bowman?" Wilkie at once wondered if what he'd already learned had a value to the General.

"I'm sure you are. Just as I'm sure your loyalty has a price."

This was moving too fast for Wilkie He thought about it for a few moments.

"How disloyal am I going to be?" he said finally.

Santander nodded approvingly. "Much better. The answer is, pretty disloyal. But don't worry about it. We'll overcome that, you and I. What I have to offer is worth a great deal more than the rewards of loyalty. You already have something you can offer to the General, maybe, but what will it win you? A pat on the head, a bonus, preferment? Hardly enough for a man like you. You've been dealt a good card. Now you'll want to gamble on it."

"How come you know so much about me?" Wilkie was undecided whether he ought to look or sound offended.

Santander sipped his drink. "I know a great deal about you. I had to go a long way back in your career to be sure you were right for me. Some of what I discovered was downright disagreeable. No, don't bristle, I was delighted with what I found. You wouldn't otherwise be much use to me."

Wilkie's indignation flourished and as quickly died. He thought he heard the sound of rare opportunity. "Who's bristling," he said. "I'm listening."

Santander smiled. "Fine. We're proceeding apace. There

is another way in which you're the ideal man for me—the only man, in fact."

"Yeah?"

"That's right." Santander looked at him coolly. "You're in charge of the work gangs on Dirk's. Who better, then, to see that progress is good, up to a point. And after that point, abysmally slow. As slow as I require it to be?"

So that was it. It had to be something to do with the expiry of the Bowman licence, of course. But he hadn't quite understood yet. If there was something under Dirk's, Bowman would get it. If there wasn't, then all Santander had was a licence to pull up nothing.

Unable to see how he could fit in as a key figure in a profitable rip-off, Wilkie's vision of big money faded somewhat. He must have registered disappointment because Santander, watching him, offered reassurance at once.

"It's not quite as simple as you think," he said.

"No? What else?"

"I've only said what I require of you," Santander said "Making it happen may be difficult, drastic even. And I expect to pay for that accordingly."

"Tell me more."

"For the moment, I want what Bowman wants," Santander explained. "Speed. I want to be reasonably sure that there really is something under Dirk's and that it can be brought up easily. Once that is established, I want whatever it is to stay underground until the Bowman licence expires. Again, that only says what is necessary, not what it may entail."

"What if it's a pile of junk or pots?"

Santander frowned irritably. "Not your problem. You'll still get paid."

"How much?" Wilkie demanded.

Unsmiling, Santander looked at him directly for some moments. "I appreciate your greed," he said flatly. "Without it, as I've said, you wouldn't be much of an ally. But before you count your money, Mr. Wilkie, give some thought to what I've said. Keeping the Dirk's deposit—let's call it that for the moment—underground may call for a continuance of

the kind of bad luck you've had so far. Do we understand each other?"

"Accidents, you mean," Wilkie grinned.

Santander's eyebrows lifted in mild surprise. "I suppose I shouldn't balk at such directness. It saves time. Yes, accidents. And you may not be able to choose how or to whom they happen."

Again Wilkie brooded a moment. No one made these kind of offers, got himself in this deep, over archaeological junk. He was convinced, now, that there really was something to be found and that it was worth big money. And he'd waited all his life for a chance at that. He didn't need to review his willingness to take a few risks to get it, or to worry about what might have to happen to anyone on Dirk's. All that mattered was how much.

"How much?" he said again.

Santander seemed pleased this time. "I'll pay double what you're already paid, week by week. That makes you my man, whether or not there is anything on Dirk's to discover."

"And if there's a big pot of gold as Bowman thinks?"

"We'll talk again. You'll have opportunities. If there is indeed a great deal of gold, you'll be better placed to bargain with me than you are at the moment. But obviously you could look forward to being moderately rich."

"You've got a deal," Wilkie decided after only a moment's hesitation. "When do I start?"

"Now," Santander said. He took a long envelope from his inside pocket and pushed it across the table. "That's your retainer. You'll get new instructions when the find is made. Meanwhile, it would be no bad thing, perhaps, if the general level of bad luck on Dirk's was maintained . . ." He stood up, looked carefully around, and left.

Wilkie cautiously opened the envelope. It was more money than he could count in a public place.

12

When Collier found Brooks out walking next day, it seemed to him that she was already changing dramatically. Had Bowman half hoped that the camp life would discipline or diminish her in some way? If so, he was going to be disappointed. She looked less fragile, more desirable than ever. Life on Dirk's was having a tonic effect. In soft blue shirt, jeans and boots, her hair swinging loose, she looked the kind of castaway a cosmetic commercial might aim at.

He steered her up the steep path to the top of the north cliffs, irritated by the mosquitoes which seemed to have settled on parts of the island like marauding mobile clouds.

"You okay? By the way, thanks for helping out with the chow. You don't need to do that."

"I enjoyed it, want to do it some more. I really like it here and I don't just want to be in the way or a passenger." She laughed just off the note and it heartened Collier that he sensed she was just as tentative with him as he himself felt.

He took her hand, pressed it, then—unwilling to lose yet another opportunity to reach some kind of understanding with her—pulled her to a stop.

She smiled, dazzlingly. "Mind, I didn't come all this way just to chaperon Maureen."

"I thought it was the other way round."

Brooks laughed. "Looks that way, doesn't it? But she's out on the site this morning. Won't be back in camp until lunch."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Collier said joyously. They started back down the slope, slipping and sliding on the loose scree, holding hands, laughing.

At the camp a truck was backed up to the main store, loading core barrels, but the driver wasn't visible. The camp street was empty, too.

Still holding her hand, Collier led her more decisively than he felt towards his own cabin. "At least Keyes won't walk in here," he said shakily.

Flushed, breathless, Brooks stood in the centre of the floor, watching him throw his clothes into a heap on a chair. Even now she seemed to doubt that this was, at last, the right time.

For one long moment Collier thought he had misread her. He had trouble focussing his eyes. His need of her suddenly overrode everything else. It no longer mattered whether Bentinck or Wilkie or Keyes knew, or cared, or came to the door, or stood in the goddam doorway watching, for God's sake. He wanted Brooks now.

For a moment longer she hesitated. Then, smiling, briskly pulled her shirt over her head. In a moment she held out her hands to him.

She was, Collier thought, quite astounding. Her waist was tiny and her breasts, as she breathed raggedly, moved ripplingly over prominent ribs. But for the rest her body was strong and gratifyingly well-fleshed.

Now, too, the tentative girl was gone. In one movement she stepped close, crushed her mouth on his determinedly, and hung all her weight on him. In an effort to get her to the bed Collier had to walk stiff-legged, carrying every ounce of her.

Many times since New York he had enacted in his mind's eye such a meeting. He had thought that with a girl like Brooks there would be many gentle first moves, some whispered words and only then a promising, satisfying but first-step union building later to real passion.

He had never been more wrong. Once committed, Brooks seemed to want no delay. She pulled him down, kissed him once gently, then turned her head aside, wriggling instead to manoeuvre his body. Geared to a much slower approach, Collier held back uncertainly. She made small demanding sounds, thrashing wildly beneath him. And still he was reluctant to enter her so soon. She flung her head from side to side, lost in her own need, impatient with his timing.

Both stunned and entranced, Collier finally surrendered. At once her response, her joy in him, was wild, exultant. The

shock of so much passion almost distracted him. It occupied the front of his mind, so that he became two people; one who was lost in their violent fusion of feeling and another who compared and measured this encounter, finding everything else in his experience pallid and prescriptive. Too soon he heard his own wordless sounds of satisfaction, fully conscious that he had been too surprised to enjoy more than magnificent relief.

Next time . . . he promised himself. And forgot everything except the sheer wonder of it all.

Her black eyes watched his face, alert to every shift of expression. It was disconcerting, like trying to stare down a spotlight. He put his hand on her hip to push her flat and she rolled away from him, legs splayed. He gloated over every line and curve of breast, stomach, hip and thigh and she watched, drinking in his enjoyment.

Collier found it enormously satisfying, too, that she said nothing at all. He had always been irritated by talking in the immediate aftermath of sex. Words, any words, tended to be, or sound, like temperature-taking. If it had been good enough, both would know it. If not, talking couldn't change it.

Delighted with her silence, he was anxious that she shouldn't break it. He pulled her close, her head on his chest and his free right hand stroking her back. They lay together for a long time like this, preoccupied with their own thoughts. He would have been unwilling to voice his own feelings and was impressed and relieved that, whatever Brooks felt, she did not want to explain herself to him. After a while they slept.

When he woke she was gone, and it was a subtly different Collier who dressed and set out, rather guiltily, for the drilling site. Several things had changed. To begin with, he at last had Bowman in perspective. Whatever the general's motives and intentions had been, they no longer mattered. As a by-product with no obvious link he was aware, too, that he felt more warmly towards Bentinck.

At peace with himself to a degree that he hadn't felt in years, he was reminded obliquely of the last time he had seen

Carol, his wife. For three or four years after their relatively amiable divorce they had exchanged Christmas and birthday cards. Then, one spring, she had rung him from her new home in St. Paul.

He was in his hotel room in New York on the first evening of a four-day stopover between jobs. Carol had tracked him down there through the Maguires, his only close friends.

She and her new husband were to fly out from Kennedy in two days and she would like to see him. A drink for old time's sake. He had agreed with fraudulent enthusiasm, remembering her husband, Tim Dalling, as a wearing, boisterous, over-confident Chevy dealer. But to his surprise she had come alone, with no word of Dalling's whereabouts.

She had been a surprise in several ways. She was more confident, more calm. Her clothes had style and she looked, if not happy, then at least adjusted to comfortable disenchantment. Instead of a fulsome account of her new home and the booming prosperity which was sending them off, the envy of their neighbourhood, to 'do' Europe, she talked without blame or strain of old times. They had dinner together, enjoying each other's successes and, without saying anything at all significant, somehow laid their marriage gracefully to rest in a way that the courtroom never had. When they kissed at parting it was as brother and sister. They were at peace. And never again sent each other cards.

At a hundred and twenty feet, Wilkie's drill hit solid stone.

"We've slowed down, eased off the pressure and changed bits," he reported. "But Jesus, it's slow going." He peeled off his heavy gloves and hung them in his belt, waiting for instructions. He held up a hand and the diesel roar dropped to a tolerable idling note.

"What is it?" Collier asked Maureen Keyes; she was tagging behind Wilkie.

"Limestone. Solid, not broken. Like a floor maybe. We're into the first few feet—just."

Collier thought about it and made up his mind on the spot. "Drill ten feet—no more. If we're not through it then, we'll start again." He saw their puzzlement and explained. "Look,

ten feet is nothing at all for a solid rock formation, and if that's what it is you could wear out all the drills we've got. On the other hand, ten feet is probably too much for a man-made floor. Okay?"

"Right!" Wilkie said. "Got it." He smacked Maureen on the rump. "Brains, baby! That's why you and I still got our feet in the dirt, kid." He hurried over to give the order to his driller.

Collier was thoughtful. Bedrock at a hundred and twenty feet. He saw no significance in that; only in the fact that every foot of the way had shown the same kind of sample—fill, in fact. Like it or not, the evidence was that someone had actually dug a shaft that deep. Why? Well, that could wait. One thing was sure, it hadn't been the single-handed Berry.

He squinted at Bentinck, who was slapping at the fierce, salt-marsh mosquitoes. "You reporting to Bowman?"

Bentinck, a little embarrassed, nodded. "Do you mind?" He was, in fact, handing a short communiqué to Ferris at the end of each day, for transmission to the General wherever he was.

"Since when did I have a choice?" Collier snorted. "Look, if you and the General and the old guy, Berry, are right about this thing, then if it's still bedrock after ten feet that tells us something, right?"

Bentinck, rubbing at the bites on his arms, concentrated for a moment, then spoke his thoughts aloud. "What does it tell us? We're at the end of the shaft, that's clear. What else? Two possibilities . . . it's either a hundred and twenty foot hoax, which seems like a lot of trouble to go to, not knowing that anyone will ever be fool enough to dig it out, or, if it isn't a hoax, then the shaft does have a purpose and we have confirmation that there is something on Dirk's, somewhere, even if not in the shaft. Is that right?"

"Maybe. We're only using a sampling drill. We know nothing yet about what the shaft might contain in the way of tunnels—flood or utility."

Bentinck looked more excited. "You think it's a chance? The only question I see is: why excavate down to a hundred

and twenty feet in the first place? Why not only to the level of a tunnel, or chamber, or whatever it is?"

"Godsake," Collier said irritably. "You know the answer to that. Think about it."

After a few moments, Bentinck came up with, "Simply to make it more difficult?"

"Wonderful!" Collier sneered. "All we've done is test what's down the line of the drilling. Excavating a ten-foot wide shaft is something else. Let's suppose this really is the kind of set-up they've got on Oak. The evidence there was that an ingenious mind tried to reach forward in time, trying to outguess opponents he would never know. He, or perhaps they, put in water traps to discourage excavation of a seemingly important shaft. But even if his opponents survived the exercise and got to the bottom, they found nothing anyway.

"So what is down there and where is it? Nobody knows. And they've taken a hell of a beating to get nowhere. Okay? So perhaps that's just what was intended. The guy who built the thing on Oak wanted to exhaust you—and then disappoint you. Maybe you'd give up then. If not, he could try to kill you anyway.

"Now, let's suppose that we have an identical shaft here on Dirk's. Or at least one that follows the Oak pattern. It's naive to suppose we'll find a jackpot sitting on the bottom, waiting to be dug up. You agree?"

Bentinck nodded, a little deflated. "It sounds crazy to say it, but I'd like more evidence that we really do have something here as clever as Oak. Hell, I don't want anyone to get hurt, but I'd be almost encouraged if we found a water trap." And then, "If we had water traps in this shaft, if it's a shaft, wouldn't the drill have revealed it? More water content in the spoil at the lower levels, something like that?"

Collier shook his head, amused. "The whole idea is that you don't find them. They find you. The water lets into your shaft from a tunnel connected to the beach inlets. These people dug a shaft, then dug the connecting tunnels with the inlets *blocked*. Next, they refilled the shaft. Finally, the stuff used to block the inlets rots away and the water floods the

tunnel. Godsake, you've read about it. You should know. Now what have you got down there?"

"A tunnel full of water, coming to a dead stop at the filled shaft."

"Right. And only when you excavate past the point of the fill does anything happen. One minute you're digging happily down, the next you've got hundreds of tons of water smacking you in the ear and if you're unlucky, or slow, you're dead. The speed of flooding must be terrific."

Wilkie, having delivered Collier's order, had drifted back, sensing that something significant was being determined. Maureen Keyes, who now seemed to have attached herself to Wilkie, caught part of what Collier had said and assumed an expression close to indignation. Brooks, too, came round the rig to join them.

"At least you do agree that this is like Oak—on the evidence so far?" Maureen demanded. Her tone suggested that Collier had come late and stupidly to a conclusion which had been obvious from the start.

Collier, shading his eyes, studied her for a moment, suppressing his irritation. "The pitch, the wood and the fibre? Okay, Maureen, let's say it's a shaft. That's still a long way from Aztec gold. All they've ever taken out of the Oak shafts—any one of several, don't forget—is their own dead."

"But there is something down there?" Bentinck pressed. "It seems logical."

"Maybe," Collier allowed.

Maureen Keyes made a small noise of disgust and turned on her heel. A truck on its way back to the camp was just pulling out and she ran to catch a lift.

"I better get going," Wilkie said. "We ain't got much of this shift left."

Collier watched him go, then turned to Bentinck. "Be sure you tell the General the whole story. We don't want to excite him unduly," he said wryly. "There's some evidence to believe that this shaft—if shaft it is—just like the one on Oak, was *meant* to be found by anyone who came out here looking."

Bentinck pursed his lips, unwilling to give up immediately on the idea that the shaft itself might reveal something significant.

Seeing his reluctance, Collier urged, "Oh, come on. Look at it like this. You're the guy in charge of what was done here. You've got something to bury that you don't want found easily, or by the wrong people. It takes you months or even years to do the job. When it's over, even if you can dispose of your work force, there will still be too many people knowing that there was a deposit, something, somewhere on Dirk's—or Oak, for that matter. So now the boss-man, the brain behind it all, has to allow for the possibility—probability even—that someone will come looking for it. Someone who doesn't know, wasn't authorised to know, the exact location. How does he deal with that? On Oak he did it very efficiently. By giving them enough of a clue to set them off and exhaust themselves and their resources in an effort to reach—nothing. You let them wear themselves out and kill them off along the way. The water traps do just that."

Bentinck was clearly not yet convinced. "I see that. But the water traps were a hell of a lot of work. More work than the shaft, even. They were dug right across the island from two different beaches so that they flooded into the shaft—like a giant rat trap, almost. Is that all they were, though? It's easier to believe they served a dual purpose—that they were protecting something specific, too."

"Sure," Collier agreed. "Don't get the idea I think the shaft—Christ, even I'm accepting that we've got a shaft, now—that the shaft is just a waste of time. If nothing else, we have to excavate it."

"But you just said—" Brooks objected.

"I'm lost, too," Bentinck grinned.

Collier pulled his ear, impatiently. "Look, the shaft is *all* we've got. To start anywhere else would be like sticking a pin in a map of the island. Until we open the shaft all we've got is a hatful of rain. We have to find the traps, if any, see how they run, and neutralise them."

Drilling to the ten-foot mark on the limestone bed finished at three and Wilkie dismissed the shift. A new crew began

shifting the derrick to the outer edge of the original shallow depression, ready to begin drilling again in the morning.

Maureen, examining the last ten feet of core sample, was excited by the presence of something that she insisted looked very much like mortar. "It could be," she urged, handing some greyish-white substance to Collier. "What if this were the lid of some kind of roofed chamber?"

Collier rubbed it in his fingers. It certainly wasn't fragmented limestone. "Well, if it is a chamber," he said at last, "it will probably crop up again at the bottom of the next bore hole." He grinned at her exasperation. "Or maybe the chamber you had in mind was too small to reach out to the edge of the shaft?"

Without answering she turned away and sought the interest of Wilkie who, bending a solicitous ear, led her towards the waiting camp truck.

The day had darkened down drastically, as the weather forecast from the *Hill* had predicted.

13

Long before dark the rain began sheeting in from the Atlantic. It fell in cascades opaque as gauze, enfolding everything. Sea and sky were one grey, whirling blur. With visibility down to fifty yards and the mainland out of sight, Dirk's Island took on the feel of a big ship, adrift on a darkening ocean.

The late rigging crew came back from the site, the trucks churning through mud and flood water. The open space in front of the mess hall and stores was awash. As the light failed the crews gathered gloomily in the bar corner of the mess hall, grateful for any sign of life and warmth.

Squelching across to his cabin, Collier passed Bentinck wearing a waterproof poncho and looking oddly older, with

his thinning fair hair pasted flat and dark across his head. Tarpaulins and barrels had been rigged to catch water from the main stores and mess hall, Bentinck reported cheerfully. It wouldn't do for drinking, perhaps, but for drilling and much else. Collier grunted thanks, aware that he hadn't thought to order it himself and again impressed that Bentinck had.

He was glad to be back in his own cabin. There was no heating, but the cabins were equipped with European-style electric showers. Collier shivered under the warm spray, dried off and was changing into dry clothes for the evening meal when Bentinck returned, this time accompanied by Wilkie. They stood, dripping, just inside the door. Both looked at him with that marked directness peculiar to bearers of bad news.

Collier took one look at them and stopped buttoning his shirt. "Now what?"

Wilkie began to say something beginning with "Sonofa-bitch . . ." but Bentinck cut across him. "There's been a bit of a fight," he said flatly. "Jake and Terrill." He said it with a forced lightness that wasn't quite convincing and Collier was at once alert.

"Okay, there was a fight. What about and who was hurt?"

Bentinck pulled his poncho over his head and dropped into a chair. Wilkie looked to Bentinck and leaned against the wall. There was clearly more to the story than an exchange of punches between the two men.

"It seems Jake went across to Brooks's cabin and found Terrill there trying to make an unwanted play," Bentinck said wearily. He hurried on, "Jake didn't think much of that so he ran Terrill out into the rain and beat him up a little."

At once Collier's anger mounted. "What the hell does that mean—'making an unwanted play'? Is Brooks okay?"

Bentinck watched a pool gathering round his feet, refusing to be rushed. "It means making a pass at her," he said quietly. "Which she was—well, having trouble fending off."

Collier choked on it. "I'll kill the bastard!" he said, already moving toward the door.

"Hold it!" Bentinck shouted. Then, as if surprised to hear

his voice raised, added softly, "Jake has already done enough."

Collier grabbed a dry jacket from his closet. "Brooks is in her cabin? Where are Jake and Terrill?"

Surprisingly, Bentinck grinned. "Jake's in his cabin, I guess, unless the men are buying him a drink. But Terrill ran out into the rain and hasn't been seen for a while."

"You've looked?" Collier demanded. "And when was this?"

"About half an hour, maybe longer. And yes, we've both looked."

"Cool him off," Wilkie growled. "Goddam creep." He beamed suddenly, struck by a memory. "Man, that Jake Ritson. He near to killed the little bastard. Would have if I hadn't pulled him off."

Collier rammed his feet into boots and stamped out He was frustrated to find Clayton already in Brooks's cabin. He was desperate to talk to her alone, to reassure her. He wondered if he was the last person in the camp to hear about the fight.

"You okay, Brooks?"

She smiled up at him cheerfully. "I'm fine. It really wasn't anything too much. Nothing I couldn't have handled. I'm tougher than I look. It was Jake who made it into a drama."

Collier was twice stung. By her use of Ritson's first name and by someone else having delivered her from an unpleasant situation. What had got into Terrill? How could he have thought to get away with something like this? He said, awkwardly, inhibited by Clayton's presence, "If you're sure . . ." He excused himself and hurried across to Ambruzzi's cabin.

The security chief, Luther and two drillers were in a card game. He explained Terrill's flight and ordered an immediate search. Luther said nothing, but Ambruzzi grinned back happily. "My pleasure. Where do you want him?"

"Chow will have started in the mess hall. Better bring him across to the store. But look, eat first, there's no sweat. The longer he's out there the better."

Ambruzzi, still chuckling, strapped on his belt and holster, the card game already forgotten. "We'll eat later," he said. The idea of bringing in the unpopular camp master obviously appealed.

"Don't mess him up," Collier warned. "He's already been gone over by Ritson."

Luther stood up, his back on Collier and let wind noisily. He began arguing with the two drillers about the money on the table.

Collier tensed and gave Luther's back a lingering scowl. "Forget it," Ambruzzi said, laying a hand on Collier's arm. "I'll teach him his manners some day."

Collier loped through the rain to the cabin Ritson shared with the foreman driller. Jake Ritson opened the door to him calmly, wearing only a towel round his waist and another round his neck. He was dabbing tenderly at his face with one hand.

With no clear idea what he wanted to say, Collier sat down, sighing. "Thanks," he said at last. "You seem to have scared the shit out of Terrill."

"No trouble," Ritson said tightly. "But next time I'll kill him."

"No, you won't," Collier ordered. "And you can forget it now. Brooks has already." He wasn't sure this was true, but he needed no internecine wars.

Ritson stared at him. "Forget it? Listen, sport, that Terrill is bad news. He's got a non-stop mouth about this whole operation. According to him the whole island is doomed, jinxed—as bad as Oak or worse. More people are bound to get killed in more accidents. Crap like that. Among this sort of bunch, one guy like that is real trouble."

Collier was startled and troubled. He wanted to ask more about it, and about who listened, who agreed with Terrill—if anyone—and how far the thing had gone. Instead he said quietly. "He seems like a steady worker, though. I'll talk to him about all this. If I don't get satisfaction I'll ship him out Okay? As for Brooks, you don't need to lay a hand on him on that account. If he goes within ten yards of her cabin again, you won't kill him—I will."

Ritson was shaking his head, sadly. "Screw all that, sport. Get Terrill off the island before there's some real damage. If you're worried about who'll do his work, I will. His and mine both."

Collier thought about it. "Maybe," he said at last. "Anyway, thanks."

The headlights of the security Jeep picked him up as he waded across to the store. By the time he got there Ambruzzi was coming out again. "All yours," he said, mopping at his face. "Found him out at the site, sheltering in the weather cabin. Better get to him before Wilkie pulls him apart."

Terrill, shivering, his clothes plastered to his body, was sitting on an upright chair. He looked surly and impenitent. Wilkie, hovering, glared down at him as if wondering how best to dismember him.

Collier pushed Wilkie aside. "Okay," he told Terrill. "Say your piece."

"Christ, you too?" Terrill sneered.

Collier took two or three breaths. He said, levelly, "Miss Remsen, like everyone else on this island, is entitled to protection. I'm here to see she gets it."

Terrill smirked. "What I hear she ain't always been so fussy. Ain't you taking your job a bit too serious?" He tilted his chair back regarding Collier coolly.

Collier let fly with his boot. The chair spun away and dropped Terrill heavily on the boards. For a moment he lay there. Then he began to get up, as if painfully. Halfway up he straightened and came on fast. Collier chopped him across the bridge of the nose with his right hand. Terrill shrieked and clutched at his face, blood spurting from his nose. Collier stepped close and hooked his legs from under him.

A cold coffee pot stood on the storeman's desk. Collier picked it up. "Never, never go anywhere near Miss Remsen or her cabin again," he said, pouring the coffee over Terrill's head. Then he added, "If I can get you off this island I will. On the first boat. Meanwhile, if you so much as look at Miss Remsen I'll let Wilkie here enjoy himself with you."

"Terrific!" Wilkie said delightedly.

Reaction from Clayton was almost friendly when Collier called him out of Brooks's cabin and asked for Terrill's face to be tended. "I'll fix him up," Clayton said grimly. "But I won't be too gentle. Rough justice is all we've got here."

14

The rain fell steadily for two whole days. Drilling remained impossible. Conditions in the camp became uncomfortable. The temperature dropped swiftly, too. Collier recorded 50°F in the store and barely 62°F in the mess hall. Though there was no work, everyone's clothes were damp and the suffocating odour almost eclipsed the lunchtime smell of hot food.

"There was some grumbling about rations," Collier told Bentinck. "Are we short, or what?"

"Not short exactly, but the *Hill* isn't due until next week. Let's say we're conserving."

"Screw that," Collier snapped. "Get on to your friend Hillier and order the *Mulberry Hill* in with supplies by Wednesday at the latest. That's four days' warning for a trip that takes half a day."

"I'll try."

"You'll do better than that," Collier ordered. "We've got to feed these guys, work or no work. Either Hillier sends in the *Hill* or I cable Bowman direct through someone on the mainland. Who's running this island anyway?"

Trapped in his cabin later, he watched anxiously for a sign of a weather break. But the sea and sky were uniformly grey, without an horizon.

The cabins had been built for spring and summer occupation, but someone had obviously miscalculated summer

temperatures in Nova Scotia. Or perhaps it was warmer on the mainland.

Without warmth in their cabins, the crews spent the day jammed into the mess hall. There was beer and coffee for them there, but that was all. Accustomed to a tiring day, they had thus far been content to sink a few beers before bed. Now they drank restlessly throughout the day and the result was complaints from the cooks; they couldn't clear up properly, they had been badgered for food between meals and some men had even begun invading the kitchen and helping themselves.

Collier had no alternative. He ordered the bar closed one hour after lunch and placed the mess hall off limits between meals. But when the rain continued through the next day and the next he began worrying about morale. There had been some jeering at meals, some horsing around and a scuffle or two in the evening chow line.

"What next?" Collier said to Bentinck sourly. "Mutiny?"

"Better break out the rifles after lunch," Bentinck agreed. "And we can always put Ritson in charge of the lash."

"Very funny," Collier gritted. "Godsake, we haven't cut a foot of shaft in two days. It gets more like Oak every day."

"And you sound more like Terrill," Bentinck advised.

Pumps were needed for the whole of the next morning while the crew attempted draining the site area and laying makeshift duckboards.

The second core sample, taken from the outer edge of the supposed shaft area, stopped dead on limestone at a hundred and twenty-five feet precisely.

Collier, struck by the oddity of that, told Bentinck, "We move five feet south of the original drilling and we drop exactly five feet more to the same limestone." He shook his head.

"What's strange about that?"

"Two things. We moved five feet only because the damn depression measured more or less exactly ten feet across. We move from the centre to the edge and we get the same drop. Not five and a half feet. Or six feet. But five feet exactly."

"Um," Bentinck said. "And now?"

"We'll move another five feet south and see what happens."

"Couldn't we begin to excavate?"

"As soon as the rig is out of the way . . ."

The rain had abated to a thin drizzle. It was cold, but with caution the ground was usable. Driven by Wilkie, the crews moved the derrick again and the first shaft excavation began.

The timber men, in oilskins, had rigged a tarpaulin in the lee of their woodpile and sheltered there, waiting for calls on strapping and shoring timbers. The shaft men overflowed the weather cabin, drinking paper cups of coffee brought out to the site in the Waggoneer by Brooks.

Working or waiting, the groups exhaled mistily into the chill, relentless drizzle without much complaint. At least there was something to do.

When the third core sample, set up for the same resistance as in the shaft span, not only took longer but also checked on the same limestone at a hundred and thirty feet precisely, the news was brought in by Bentinck. Without comment, Collier sought Maureen Keyes in the corner of the big store which she used for her sample boxes and recording.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Well, the reason it took longer was because it was tougher going—Wilkie told you that? Outside the 'shaft' area the ground was far less disturbed. Oh, there's some mixed spoil in there, but mostly in the first thirty feet. Exactly what you'd expect if you had a shaft with a bigger head area and had it open for a long time. But that isn't what you want to know." Maureen chewed a thumbnail. "It doesn't make sense. If it had been simply *around* the hundred and thirty-foot mark we could have said it was just a rock fault. But it's exactly five feet deeper to match the five feet further out from the shaft."

"So what does that tell you?"

Bentinck supplied it. "That we're dropping down on to a perfect slope?"

"Right."

Maureen scowled, her professional opinion sidestepped. "Impossible."

Collier laughed. "I thought you were the one who believed in a chamber and the ol' Aztecs an' all?"

She put on an expression of barely-controlled impatience, searching for some scientific put down which would restore her authority, but Bentinck jumped in excitedly. "What's so mysterious about a slope?"

"No, not just a slope," Collier corrected. "You said it yourself—a perfect slope." He took Maureen's scratch pad and sketched the ground level, the shaft area and, in dotted lines the possible fall-away of a shaft beneath. Then he dropped one line through its centre, one at the south edge, and another the same an equal distance outside the edge.

"There's the line of the three boreholes. Each of the second pair is five feet deeper. If you connect them up—there's your slope. Now . . . what if we sank another on the north side and it, too, fell to exactly a hundred and twenty-five feet?"

Bentinck stared at the drawing and Collier encouragingly dropped the line in for him. In a moment, Bentinck looked up, astonished. "A pyramid—is that what you're saying?"

"Fluke," Maureen sneered. "More likely limestone lying in a stepped formation."

"Or . . ." Collier said teasingly, "a step pyramid."

"Are you serious?" Bentinck demanded.

Collier threw up his hands. "Godsake! You were the ones who wanted to believe. Now you're getting some evidence you want to run away from it." He was delighted with Maureen's discomfiture and Bentinck's astonishment. "Anyway, there's one quick way to find out."

"What's that then?" Maureen's tone suggested that, whatever it was, and whatever it revealed, she wouldn't consider it as proof of anything at all.

"Drill one right down the north edge of the shaft, as I said. If that stops at a hundred and twenty-five feet you wouldn't need much further proof."

"How soon can we do that?" Bentinck was enthusiastic.

"You want to go and give Wilkie the order?"

Bentinck hurried away. Maureen Keyes shrugged and then, apparently wanting to hedge her bet, said mildly, "Do you really think that's what we'll find?"

"You tell me," Collier said. "You're the geologist. Tell me again how it couldn't happen."

15

Excavating the shaft began at a fair pace. Wilkie's men, using the crawler crane, a bucket excavator and shovels, worked two at a time in the cramped space, riding up every few minutes with the spoil. It was crude but effective, and with fresh men at the bottom all the time the operation kept another crew busy with cutting and fitting the timber shoring.

The whole area between the shaft head and the line of dunes above the marsh had begun to look like the site of a major construction. The dumper began to build a small hill of spoil on the south side of the site, behind a ridge and clear of any danger that too much rain would carry it back down into the site area. Truck-mounted diesels were being used to work the timber and, after the first twenty feet, to carry air down the shaft through a giant PVC sleeve. Pumps stood by to go into action against flooding from an Oak Island-style water trap.

The noise, at times, was appalling, and it was noticeable that the salt-marsh birds spent the daylight hours farther north, returning fretfully to the marsh only towards the end of the day's work.

At thirty feet timbers, arranged in a kind of staging, were uncovered, exactly as the sampling had forecast. Unidentifiable fibre mass and a layer of friable tarry, matter which might once have been pitch, seemed to have been laid both above and below the timbers.

"Is this a find of some sort?" Bentinck asked. "Do we tell Bowman?"

"Tell him anyway," Collier shrugged. "Let him decide. He's the man with all the answers."

They stood on the lip of the shaft, now skirted by a prefabricated platform, staring down at the frantic activity below. "It would make sense," Bentinck said thoughtfully, "if the shaft was the way they came out. In which case it's our way in . . ."

"They?" Collier raised his eyebrows.

"The ol' Aztecs," Bentinck grinned.

Collier was dogged by doubts. If only it were that simple. Almost without realising it he had totally withdrawn from his New York position that he was hired simply to excavate the shaft, look for a chamber, and that was that. Here *was* a puzzle, and he was hooked. There was little joy, though, in the thought that they were no longer excavating something that Berry, even if he'd had help, could have constructed as bait for his patron. On Oak Island they had pitted the field with shafts, all of them with some sort of logic behind them, but none had ever produced a chamber, a pyramid, a way ahead of any kind, however tough and hazardous.

There was the oddity of the stepped limestone, too. What was that for? He had enjoyed scoffing at Maureen's assertion that it might be a geological accident. It was improbable; but then nature revelled in the improbable.

He had also begun to worry about water traps. With the memory of Durrant and Bayliss keenly in mind, the possibility of new disaster nagged at him. Maureen had done a quick survey of the whole site area, showing that the site itself was barely thirteen feet above sea level. With the diggers down to thirty feet already there was the ever-present threat that today, tomorrow or the next day they would uncover a water trap.

That Bentinck sensed his tension Collier was sure. The man had a knack of reading your moods.

"Problem?" Bentinck asked.

"This isn't a lot of hole yet," Collier said, turning to stare at the salt-marsh. "But it's enough below sea level to get some

kind of pressure on—supposing that at least one water trap is fed from the nearest tide." He began walking down towards the spartina and the grey swell beyond.

Once over the dunes they looked down on neat desolation. Dead spartina, generations of it, stretched round the inward curve of the coast like a water-holding carpet. The matted layers of it produced a soggy surface which defied even the summer sunshine. Under the top layers it compressed into a peat-like material, holding salt and making it a hostile environment for salt-intolerant vegetation.

"Trouble is," Collier mused, "that when that shaft was dug this area might have looked entirely different. The dunes suggest that there was sand all the way at one time. If there's a water trap dug through from here to the shaft, then the inlet could be anywhere under that lot . . ." He indicated the whole quarter-mile sweep of spartina. "It's a worrying thought. On Oak they could bulldoze the sand away, identify the inlets and then block them up safely."

"Perhaps they chose sand here too," Bentinck suggested. "From Falla Beach, not here at all."

"Let's get back," Collier said. "I want to look at the shaft myself." He noticed with some surprise that he had started including Bentinck in his reasoning.

On the site Brooks was moving off in the Waggoneer; but Wilkie beckoned urgently to him from the weather cabin.

"Parsons was on to the *Hull* a few minutes back. Seems ol' General-President Bowman hisself will be aboard tomorrow. There's other messages for you. I said you'd drop by the shack."

Collier, squeezing drizzle from his hair, squinted at Bentinck. "Coming to look for himself? Godsake!" Then, seeing Bentinck's air of gloom, "What's your problem? I'll give his boy a good report."

"Don't do me any favours," Bentinck said, secretly pleased. "If I try to rape Brooks after breakfast will you put me off the island with Terrill? The General's displeasure couldn't be as much punishment as this place."

Collier snorted. "Who says the General would be displeased?"

Bentinck grinned, but Wilkie looked pained. "What kinda talk is that? That's one nice kid, that Remsen."

"Smart-ass talk is all," Collier assured him. "Listen, I want to go down that hole myself. So far, no trouble. And that's why we ought to tread softly."

16

The following morning the sky cleared with astonishing speed. By ten the temperature had reached seventy, and the site began to steam. The lift in morale was magical. Grins, jokes and cheerful scuffles returned. Collier was pleased, but cautious. On Dirk's Island, he reminded himself, anything could happen.

The only blot on the day was the sudden increase in the mosquitoes; they drifted in from the marsh, hungrily feeding from the bountiful supply of naked flesh and creating a fresh undercurrent of discontent.

After a careful examination of the shaft, Collier had found nothing worrying but remained uneasy. Before releasing the crews the night before, he had lectured them briefly, emphasising the need to stay alert to any change in the make-up of the shaft wall. They had listened attentively and he hoped it was enough. They needed to find the trap before it found them.

He rode out in the Jeep, Brooks driving. As they passed, one of the cooks, still in his whites and cap, silhouetted on the promontory between Falla Beach and the salt-marsh, was fishing in the shallows. He turned to wave and Collier waved back. It looked good there: the placid seascape, the climbing sun, the relaxed look of the man. Still, he had Brooks. He kissed her ear, she giggled and the Jeep bounced crazily

through the scrub in a wide sweep before she regained the track.

The dumper was coming back from the ridge empty. If one load had been shifted already, Wilkie must have stepped up the pace. As Collier went down to the site he noticed the mosquitoes. They were nothing new; everyone in the camp had suffered in some degree, but Collier had never seen so many on the move. The marsh was also full of horsefly and deerfly, both of which delivered a burning sting while drawing a blood meal. But the mosquitoes were becoming a serious hazard. The salt marsh variety were active throughout the day, the sun seemingly not drying out their body moisture. Now they homed in on the site in bloodthirsty swarms.

The man working in the shaft seemed to be best off. On the surface, shirts went back on as the day warmed up. Collars were turned up and sleeves rolled down. As Collier watched, slapping at his own face and neck, every movement the men made around the shaft head became punctuated by a crazy routine of arm-waving, rubbing and slapping.

Bentinck, perspiring, appeared by his side. "And now a plague of mosquitoes," he said ruefully.

"Yeah, it's like the goddam Egyptians and the Israelites. Tomorrow—boils."

To the south of the shaft the fourth core-sampling was in progress, the din of the diesels there clashing with the tumult of the air and water pumps and the crawler-crane attending the shaft. Wilkie gave him a silent okay thumb from the other side of the platform.

"What depth?" Collier asked Bentinck.

"Near enough forty feet." Bentinck dabbed with a handkerchief at his face, aflame with bites.

"What can we do about the mosquitoes?" asked Collier.

"Try a spray. We've got something in the stores, though it's probably forbidden under the terms of the lease."

"Screw the lease," Collier said. "Spray anyway."

"A good time to do it," Bentinck said, "might be while we take a look through the salt-marsh for trap inlets."

"Yeah, fine. Get someone to pull the stuff out of the store and we'll tackle it together this afternoon." Collier grimaced,

ducking his head back as a swarm settled around them. "Christ, this is impossible."

"Clayton has probably got repellent cream, too." Bentinck winced. "Though what good it is I don't know. They usually eat stuff like that."

Arms flailing, they moved towards the platform. In the last few minutes the swarms had increased in density. Activity round the shaft head began to break up, the men cursing, covering up, backing off.

Seeing that work was impossible, Collier attracted Wilkie's attention. When he had it he spread his hands, washing out the shift. Something would have to be done before work could resume. "Get Brooks back to camp," Collier shouted to Bentinck, "and fast."

Wilkie signalled the man on the crawler-crane to cut his motor. He turned and repeated the signal to the air and water pump men.

At that moment, one man on watch on the lip of the platform shouted a warning. For some seconds it went unheeded in the general shouts cancelling the shift.

Again the man shouted, waving his arms. There was a general rush to the lip of the shaft. At that moment the diesels stopped and in the sudden hush the cry of alarm was taken up.

Collier cringed, his gut squeezed by fear. He ran forward, glad to see that Wilkie was already clearing the crew from the platform.

"Shaddap! Get back! Get off the goddam platform!" Wilkie bawled. He hit out, sending two men reeling. The rest scrambled away.

The bucket had released its last load into the dumper and was on the return swing. "Gimme the bucket here!" Wilkie shouted to the man on the crawler-crane.

Lying flat on the lip, Collier stared down, trying to see past the lights. The two diggers who had been on firm bottom seconds before were now afloat, only heads and shoulders clear as they thrashed in the curds of white, scummy water. Even as he watched, the water rose at an alarming rate, lifting the men like corks in a whirlpool.

The first water trap had been found.

The bucket now swung back, hovering, swinging wildly. "Drop it!" Wilkie ordered. He looked up at the operator, exasperated. "Down, for Chrissakes."

The bucket jolted down a few feet, still swinging.

Collier, looking up, saw the frightened look on the face of the operator. The grab dropped on the swing, smashed into the edge of the platform only a foot from Wilkie and, still rocking, dropped swiftly.

Collier watched, fretting. The rate of descent was too fast, too jerky. It slammed into one side of the shaft, then the other, steadied, and then fell to the full length of the unwound cable, carrying away a heavy, temporary timber brace. One end of the brace slithered down the shoring for a moment, almost held and then dropped in the wake of the grab bucket.

The men below saw it and quailed. But it never reached them. Turning on the fall, the brace lodged across one corner of the shaft, wedged tightly into the angle.

The diggers came off the sides of the shaft, looking warily up for assistance.

"Hold it!" Wilkie held his hand aloft.

Now this, too, began to go wrong. Unable to see how far the grab had gone down, or how fast the shaft was filling, the operator obeyed Wilkie's call. The bucket stopped, but under water.

Blowing, shouting, their relief plain in joyous grins, the swimmers could at least reach for the bucket's cable and hold tight to it. Their danger was over, it seemed.

"Okay, up!" Wilkie roared. And, to no one in particular, "Let's get these guys out of there." He too seemed to relax.

Collier, however, had a premonition it wasn't over. He remembered with sickening clarity the freak accident that had killed Durrant, and Wilkie's verdict, "It doesn't happen."

As if the very thought had produced disaster, from below came a long, wrenching sound. The shaft itself seemed to have uttered a protracted groan. His pulses pounding, Collier bent dangerously low over the edge to see what might have caused it.

The cribbing on the west wall began to sag out of horizontal. Part of the lower shoring had evidently given way, the soil and rock behind it softened and scoured by the swirling weight of water.

Almost at once the upper shoring began to buckle, weakened by the subsidence behind and below and by the dragging weight of the collapsed stages underneath the water level. Miraculously, for the moment it held.

"Up! Up!" Wilkie shrieked.

The bucket began to rise.

Still the shoring held, but Collier winced as another heavy cross brace began to slide. Again the swimmers saw it and flinched, torn between flattening against the side of the shaft, letting go their hold on the cable or submerging themselves for protection. Before they could do anything at all, the huge balk of timber tilted down and speared into the north wall, one end held fast in the shoring and the other coming to rest across the brace already wedged across the corner of the shaft. Together they made an effective log-jam, blocking the further rise of the bucket.

Wilkie, watching on his knees, glared down, maddened by the hitch but seemingly not alarmed. "Hold it!" he shouted to the bewildered crane operator.

At once Collier saw with awful clarity what would happen next.

"Gimme a foot!" Wilkie beckoned.

The grab came up two feet, the top hinge and coupling jolting up against the jammed timbers and threatening to drop them on the white-faced crew below.

"Jesus!" Wilkie's agitation was understandable. Collier read the situation identically. The diggers had to hold on to the cable or drown, but they couldn't use it to climb up past the jammed timbers in case their weight dislodged them. Like the bucket itself, they were imprisoned.

Still the water climbed rapidly.

The buckling, sagging, shoring offered no alternative either. If they put their weight on it they might pull it all down on themselves, falling back into the black water, now treacherously concealing the grab. A fall of that kind would

be fatal. So they kicked and thrashed, apprehensive but still hopeful.

"Ropes!" Collier yelled. "Get two lines in there."

There was a nightmare delay of about forty-five seconds before two coils of line appeared. He grabbed both ends and raced across the platform to secure them to a leg of the drilling derrick. Wilkie was throwing loops into the other ends. They arrived together at the edge of the platform.

Muddy water now covered the log jam. The heads of the men bobbed intermittently around it. The cable still hung taut.

Collier wasn't sure whether the shout of anguish was his own or Wilkie's. He flung off jacket and boots, grabbed one of the lines and trod recklessly down the shored sides of the shaft towards the water. He had to risk the stability of the shoring. The men couldn't be worse off. They had only a few seconds in which to survive.

He trod water with Wilkie close behind, easing himself down until only his head was clear, then slid underwater. It was salt and filthy and stung his eyes. He should have had a waterproof light, but he needed both hands anyway. He sensed rather than saw one of the men kicking near him, grabbed at him, lost him and had to break surface for air. Plunging again he went down too far, smashed his knee painfully against the grab, rose a foot or so, located the man again and seized him by the shirt. He jerked the line wildly, hoping the men above had the sense to haul him up. There had been no time for instructions of that kind. To his immense relief he began to rise. But the man he was holding had gone limp. Keeping hold of his unconscious deadweight was agony. It wrenched at his shoulder, but he held on grimly. Wilkie appeared beside him. Mercifully the weight was eased. Both lines were hauled in.

The ascent to the platform, scrabbling with their feet against the shoring, was a relatively short haul but, half-blinded by the muddy salt water, it seemed endless.

At last Collier crouched on the platform's edge in the sun, shivering, bruised and aching. He peered over the edge intently, but there was no sign of the second man. A few feet

away, Wilkie lay on his back like a beached whale, spouting and rumbling.

It was some time before Collier stood up, blinking. He was aware of Bentinck and Brooks and their sounds of concern. "Who did we bring up?" he asked.

"Rosen. But he's dead," someone answered.

"And the other one?"

"Still down there. We're trying to get the big timbers up, then we can look for him."

It was almost an hour later, when the timbers had been cleared, that the body of the second man, O'Neill, was recovered. Wrapped in a blanket he was taken to the workshop to lie alongside Rosen.

Still shivering, Collier stayed to watch the pumps go in, ignoring Brooks's protests. With both pumps working full out the water hardly seemed to fall. Evidently there was a weight of back-up water in the flood tunnel which had to be cleared before the shaft itself showed improvement. Stunned, dispirited and for the moment at a loss, Collier rode back to camp with Wilkie.

"Maybe Terrill ain't so stupid," Wilkie growled at last.

"Crap!" Collier snarled. "Bad luck, that's all."

But for the moment he wondered whether he believed that.

At the evening meal the crews were subdued. Three accidents with three deaths was a record which was rapidly overhauling Oak's. It was noticeable that Terrill, never a popular figure and ignored by many since the incident over Brooks, was being included now in the despondent table talk.

Collier, eating with Brooks and unwilling to talk with either Wilkie or Bentinck just yet, unready for what they might say, kept his eye on Terrill. The man's desperate animation seemed to be received with some measure of acceptance. He decided he would have to do something about Terrill soon.

In his cabin, later, he lay with Brooks for a long time. Grateful for the comfort of her arms around him, he had no thought of anything else. The faces of Rosen and O'Neill, staring up at him from the shaft flood, haunted him.

"How the hell did I get into this?" he said gloomily.

Brooks felt for his hand. "I, for one, tried to steer you here," she reminded him.

Collier exhaled noisily, refuting any suggestion that he had been influenced by her. "Even Wilkie is beginning to think there's some kind of jinx on Dirk's—something like the guys who opened Tutankhamun's tomb, and later died."

She said nothing and when he'd waited a moment or two Collier sought her eyes.

"That's crazy," she supplied. "It will look a lot better in the morning."

"Not for Rosen and O'Neill, it won't."

17

The first sign of the *Mulberry Hill* was a smudge on the clear blue horizon. About four miles offshore it turned south and came to anchor. Almost at once the old, grey-painted landing barge appeared on the lee side.

Collier, relieved, wrestled with his mood. He would be glad to see the food, water and diesel, but remained ambivalent about Bowman. Nothing that had happened so far could be blamed on Bowman. Indeed, he would be lucky if Bowman was less than vituperative about the new accidents. Yet he couldn't shake off a sense of indignation that he had been forced into responsibility for the lives of the crews, even the uneasy feeling that Bowman had somehow anticipated that the operation would somehow involve tragedy. Fretfully, he acknowledged that if he believed that, and could reasonably hold it against Bowman, he was more than halfway to accepting Terrill's nonsense.

It also rankled that Bowman should arrive on this perfect, burnished day, having seen nothing of the earlier problems.

He made up his mind that on at least one issue he would give the General no chance to argue: Terrill must go.

He watched the first swift loading through binoculars. In less than thirty minutes the landing craft swung clear of the freighter and began to beat doggedly towards Falla Bay.

Lowering the glasses, Collier was surprised to see a launch, which must have set out from the port side, closing rapidly with the beach below him. Painted blue and white and big as an admiral's barge, it was obviously Bowman's toy.

He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath and walked down the path to the head of the beach. As the launch nosed into the hard sand, two muscled, expressionless members of the freighter's crew leaped from the prow in unison like circus performers, steadied it against the surf and ran it aground.

Bowman stepped up on to the prow and dropped easily, youthfully, to the beach. He was wearing exquisite yachting whites and a Navy-style visored cap heavy with braid.

Hypnotised by the efficiency of all this, Collier moved forward to meet him.

"These deaths," Bowman said without preamble. "We can't afford them."

"We're trying to keep them down," Collier said drily.

"The Canadian authorities are becoming difficult. I have friends here, of course. But friends can only do so much. Next time they're going to want to see for themselves what goes on here." He gave Collier a fleeting glance of reproach. "We don't want that."

"We have nothing to hide," Collier said.

Bowman hesitated, then looked round the audience assembling on the beach. "Right!" he said loudly. The assertive manner had scarcely faltered, but just for a moment Collier thought he had seen Bowman check with what his mind's computer knew.

"While my lease does not specify that the work we undertake must be free from hazard or accident," Bowman said, "some bureaucrat in Halifax is soon going to want to satisfy his conscience if we aren't more careful."

Collier nodded. "Got that, Wilk? A little maiming if you have to, but no more stiffs."

"It's no joking matter," Bowman snapped. "Already some journalist has been hinting strongly that rumours about this island should be investigated by representatives from health, public safety and the police."

Collier objected that Torrance would probably have gone away happy and without a useful line of copy if he hadn't been chased off by security. "They say they got their orders from Hillier."

"I don't want snoopers out here, press or otherwise," Bowman said, ignoring the point.

"They got that message."

But Bowman didn't hear him. He advanced a few yards, came to a snappy halt and folded his arms across his chest. There had been no greetings, no handshakes. Collier wondered if Bowman ever did shake hands.

"This is an important day," Bowman announced, holding all the island in his satisfied gaze. He recorded the arrival of Bentinck with a stare that lingered for one disapproving moment about Bentinck's right shoulder, then resumed, "I have arranged for a picnic to be served." He gestured. "To everyone. Here on the beach. Food and, uh, drink, will be put ashore shortly. The weather will hold like this," he tilted his chin up McArthur-style, daring it to do otherwise. "I assume that there is no work until the shaft is pumped out."

Without waiting for anyone to confirm this, he went on, "Great effort, however. I suggest we review what has been achieved at a brief conference for principals in, say, one hour. Meanwhile, don't bother escorting me. I'll show myself around." He smiled pleasantly, nodded at Wilkie and strode off towards the site.

Collier watched him go. "I don't believe it," he said, shaking his head.

"It's called the habit of command," Bentinck offered. "Who around here constitutes a principal?"

"Wilk? Maureen? Better get the word to her. Oh, and Brooks should be there too. While you're at it, spread the

word that routine chow is out. It's a command picnic, here on the beach, like it or not."

But there was no need to spread the word. Drawn by the weather, the breeze which was driving the mosquitoes inland, or perhaps the sheer novelty of visitors, the crews were already on their way down to the beach. Within a few minutes of Bowman's arrival it was filled with groups of men soaking up the sun.

Waiters and deckhands from the freighter began unloading hampers and crates of beer to a cheerful roar of approval. Trestle tables were set up. The crews found the beer at once and set to work, ignoring the protests of the freighter crew.

In the mess hall, precisely at noon, Bowman, seated behind one of the long tables, looked up from a yoga-like reverie. "Let us begin," he said. "First, is there anything fresh to report?"

Collier, annoyed with himself for allowing Bowman to have things ordered in his own way, at first pretended not to realise that proceedings had started and then gave a brief, unemotional account of the two latest deaths.

Bowman listened in silence, his attention riveted on his wrist, as if watching for his own pulse. "Unfortunate," he said at last. He looked at Bentinck. "Their bodies are to be taken aboard the *Hill* immediately. I want no shadow to mar our little celebration today."

"What are we celebrating?" Collier asked. "Three guys dead?"

There was a brief silence. If this had been the Army, Collier thought, Bowman would have ordered him tied to the wheel of a gun-carriage. But for once Bowman looked thoughtful. When he spoke it was with what Bentinck, at least, was able to recognise as a conciliatory tone.

"No," he said patiently. "We're celebrating the discovery, by this team, of something that is almost certain to prove at least as interesting as the Oak Island affair." He smiled at Collier. "I've studied Miss Keyes's drawings closely. Not that I needed to. Four drillings come to a dead stop on a precisely graded limestone slope. That pretty much speaks for itself."

"Child's play," Collier agreed.

But Bowman was unmoved. "As to your casualties . . . well, three dead and one injured—that's a better average than they had on Oak. And with far better results."

Collier snorted. "We don't know anything more now than when old Berry conned you into all this. And what's all this about a better average? It isn't football, for Christ's sake. Three guys are dead."

He looked at Bentinck for support, forgetting that Bentinck was Bowman's man. Astonishingly, as if learning a new skill, Bentinck nodded agreement.

Bowman pursed his lips. "These men all knew the risks. Any venture of this kind carries special hazards."

Collier pushed his hands through his hair. "We're not up the Amazon!" he exploded. "This is Canada. Three miles away they're eating TV dinners and going to drive-in movies. Nobody expects to get dead just digging a hole."

"Why do you think they're paid and insured double?" Bowman's tone seemed to be winding up tight. "Why do you think I pamper them with everything they need?" He drew his head back, staring hard at Collier. "Anyway, you're the wrong man to be labouring the fact of our three deaths, mister. Carelessness, or, shall we say, lack of proper caution, seems to have been a prime factor in each case. You're stuck with that. And you're the boss here . . ."

For a moment, Collier choked, outraged. He heard Brooks exclaim, "No!" When he found his own voice he said, quietly enough. "Okay, that's it. I quit."

"I think not," Bowman said sharply.

"I don't take stuff like that from anyone," Collier said lamely. It was out before he could think of something more original.

"You're under contract."

"So sue me!" Christ, Collier thought, this sounds like a B-movie. But he meant it.

"What an impetuous man you are," Bowman said smoothly. He smiled a little to show he didn't take Collier too seriously. "If you gave up so easily, yes, I would sue. But you won't. It *is*, I admit, unfair to suggest that these accidents are

any fault of anyone here." He swept Wilkie, Maureen and even Bentinck with a smile of absolution. "I'd rather put it down to bad luck. Just that. But"—he made another tonal shift to the long view— "you've also made impressive progress. In this short time you've gone directly to the heart of the Dirk's Island secret. On Oak they've taken generations and still not come closer. Now you'll go on with your work. The problems are over. Getting the job done is well within the experience of your teams and the capabilities of your equipment and resources." He looked at the mess hall window. "You've had bad weather. Now it's fine. You were working in the dark. Now you have a result, a specific nut to crack. You were short on supplies, but they're coming ashore now. The crews are resting. They're going to have a good time. Has anyone actually asked to leave because he can't stand the pace?" He stood up, smiling. "Forget it, Collier. Let's get this thing done—then we all win together. Right?"

A moment of silence, then Collier put his hands together and clapped, slow and soft. "You thinking of taking up politics, General?"

Bentinck caught his eye and winked. It might have meant anything.

"I want Terrill off," Collier said.

Bowman laughed and shuffled his papers.

"Off!" Collier repeated. "Out of it. He assaulted Miss Remsen, for Christ's sake!"

Bowman cocked his head, considering the way to make a knotty point. He didn't look at Brooks. "Assaulted?" he echoed. "Made a pass at her, do you mean? Most girls learn to cope with that before high school."

"He's disruptive," Bentinck said loudly. "A bad influence."

Bowman looked at him briefly as if trying to remember his name, but said nothing.

Collier knew he should say more but he felt helpless to project Terrill's crime of alarmist rumour as being worth serious thought. In the bad weather, in the marooned atmosphere which gripped the camp when the freighter wasn't at hand, it had seemed important. Now, he admitted to himself,

it was unlikely that anyone except perhaps Jake Ritson was giving much weight to Terrill's ideas. The incident seemed suddenly quite irrelevant. After all, he did have Ambruzzi's men to keep Terrill in check.

"What all this underlines, in fact, is that Dirk's is no place for a woman," Bowman reminded them all.

"I shall stay here, if Mr. Collier doesn't object," Brooks said at once.

Bowman showed them his palms in a gesture of non intervention. "Well, it's clear that Miss Remsen herself doesn't fear further embarrassment."

Bentinck stood up. "But we do need constant attention to our radio calls."

"That," Bowman addressed himself to Collier, "was the whole purpose of installing two-way radio. It's true there was a trifling initial delay." He shook his head sadly, as if nonplussed by Collier's desire to make difficulties, got up and came forward. "I came here to see for myself the fantastic progress you've made in a venture which may well prove to be historic. What you're doing may be the subject of books years ahead. Your names may become as famous as those who opened the tomb of Tutankhamun." If he saw anything infelicitous in this reference it didn't show in his face or slow his delivery. "But all you can tell me is that your biggest problem is that one of your number is an oversexed scaremonger who shows little refinement, except in his taste for women."

Maureen Keyes snickered and Bowman rewarded her with a throwaway smile.

In the brief silence, Wilkie came to life. "If I'm here because I got some say," he said frowning, "I got to tell you, General, that Terrill is a goddam sonofabitch. Somebody picked a real lulu there, and if you want a good job done here you gotta get him off this place before he gets himself killed."

Bowman's surprise was clear. He looked at Wilkie appreciatively. "Well, now, Wilkie, I can't go along with you there. I can't order Miss Remsen back to New York and out of harm's way—which would be the best solution—and I believe Terrill is a good camp master. But I'm sure that with

men like yourself to protect her, Terrill is unlikely to misbehave again."

Wilkie scowled. "Okay, General. But if he gets outta line again I'll throw him down the goddam shaft myself."

Bowman laughed, genuinely amused, and even Collier smiled a little. "I've had a look at this shaft of yours, but there are one or two things I don't understand. Perhaps you'd take me out there yourself. I won't keep you long."

Wilkie got up at once and they moved towards the door. Bowman looked back at them, genially. "Gentlemen . . . Miss Keyes, Brooks . . ." The meeting was over.

Collier lingered. His conscience nagging, he took Brooks by the arm. "He said one sensible thing. Dirk's is no place for a woman. I don't give a damn about Keyes, but why not wait for me in New York? I never should have asked you to come here."

"I've never had so much fun."

"Bitten mad by mosquitoes, scorched, soaked, salted and assaulted?"

"You think New York would be more fun without you?" She looked disappointed in him and Collier could see why. He'd gone the wrong way about it. "I'll stay," she said decisively.

Before they reached the beach they were stopped by Jake Ritson. "Is this right—that Terrill stays?" he demanded.

Brooks, sensing another scene, walked a little ahead.

"He stays," Collier admitted. "I blew it."

Ritson looked at him steadily for a moment then turned on his heel and marched away towards the north. He was obviously not going to be at Bowman's picnic.

Brooks, too, had turned away from the beach towards the cliffs. The sounds from the beach suggested she would be out of place, and anyway she felt Collier could use an interval in which to recover his humour. Up on the cliffs, too, she would be safe from any prickly encounter with Bowman.

Halfway up she overtook Jake Ritson and together they toiled towards a grassy knoll overlooking the one tiny cove which bit into the base of the high headland. They stood looking down, breathless. Ritson put his hand on her arm.

"Watch this," he said. A grey herring gull with flesh-coloured legs lofted in swiftly from round the cliff, hovered and then dropped something from its beak to smash on the rocks below.

"He uses the rocks to break open his clam. Brings it all the way round here from the sand."

The gull swooped, gobbled and at once flew off to fetch another.

"Marvellous," Brooks said. "Smart bird."

"Not nice, though. They often eat their own young."

Brooks moved back a little into the shade of the pines where it was still possible to see down into the cove. The breeze and the green peace were a blessed relief from the heat of the scrubland plain.

"I might just stay up here until the bugle sounds retreat," Brooks murmured "Bring a tent and rough it."

"You know what's best?" Ritson grinned.

"I do. No mosquitoes." Brooks looked down at her arms ruefully. "Isn't there anything to be done?"

"This kind will swarm forty miles inland for a meal. What chance have we got, only a mile deep? They're hungry, they'll find you no matter what you do. Fires might help at night, if it gets any warmer."

She looked at him sideways, interested in him. "You're a loner, Jake. Is that a good way to be?"

"How else should I be? I can be a team man too. If you're thinking about my attitude to Terrill, it's just that I know he'll be trouble. He's the kind of nut that can't be reached with sense."

"And you worry about it. That's what I mean. You're quick, efficient, reliable— Alan says so. But at the same time there's always something of you standing off to one side, waiting for everyone else to screw up."

Ritson skimmed a flat piece of rock far out into the abyss and watched it sail down to the surf. "Collier's the guy paid to make the decisions," he said dourly. "He's the boss."

"And that's not a cop-out?"

"No, it isn't." He sat up indignantly. "I've told him about Terrill, warned him. But he's allowing the guy to stay. That's

a mistake. Terrill stirs up the guys. Oh, they're fine today. But wait until something else happens. The place is cursed—the pit can't be dug without more deaths—that kind of stuff. Sometimes they laugh at him, but mostly they listen and worry. Look, if you have any influence with Alan on things like this, it's not too late. Tell him to get the bastard off the island, quick."

"Um," Brooks said vaguely. She thought about it, but not too deeply. Ritson stretched out flat and closed his eyes, apparently satisfied he'd made enough of the point, and she was relieved. The breeze rushing through the pines, melding perfectly with the sound of surf from below, soothed them both. Brooks, who had fretted much of the night away over Collier, relaxed at last.

Ritson, absorbed by the vivid lights and colours behind his closed eyelids, wondered if Collier knew what a prize he had in Brooks. He winced, remembering that he himself had made the mistake of losing the right woman and was still paying for it. Ritson had no idea where Annie was now. He had met her in Portland in '72. He had gone unwillingly to a party already three-parts drunk and belligerent. Annie had been there and something about her had reached him and sobered him, just like that.

When they met she was twenty and had tried working at almost everything. She had sold shoes, gas, burgers, ice-cream, jewellery, lingerie and auto accessories, waitressed up and down the State and even tried looking after the two weird kids of a short-stay TV star in Beverly Hills.

She wasn't pretty, but she was long-legged, pale-haired, pale-skinned and fearless. When Ritson found her she was out of luck and out of money. Her response to him was wary. She had been almost married once, assaulted twice, robbed twice, jailed once, beaten up and let down more times than she could remember. At one very low point she had been coerced into living for six fearful weeks with a violent, moody, small-time racketeer until the police came looking for him on charges of extortion and attempted murder and she had been free to run. Through all of it she had grown understandably cynical. Challenged by her surface hostility, Ritson had found

himself wanting to look after her, build up her ego, restore her faith in herself and her luck. And for a while it had worked. Her manner became tough and breezy during their first few months, then once more dependent and trusting. He bought a trailer-home and carried her with him wherever he worked. She had been bored when he wasn't with her, but grateful for what was probably the first constant concern and affection she'd ever had.

Then he hit a bad patch himself. He took an easy job, policing a valuable land development. He had two good men to help him chase away squatters, vandals and bums and keep an eye on the expensive plant scattered over five thousand acres. It had been too easy, perhaps. Restless, he had begun drinking again. Not too heavily, but sufficient to warp his judgement. First he got into poor physical shape. Then, somehow, he became a regular at a game in the back room of the last house in town. He lost a lot of money. Not all he had, but enough. Feeling badly about that, he picked quarrels with Annie. More often than not, she just smiled, sadly.

One fine September evening he ran out of ready money and decided to go home early. The car wouldn't start and he walked it. On the way he had time to think. Something about the night and his despondency made him see how far off course he'd swung. Full of remorse, he'd almost run the last mile. But Annie had gone.

He was shaken but philosophical. He shrugged off his loss, got another job, saved money. He moved to Bowman-Brace. His reputation began to build, and he was again thought of as tough, uncompromising, reliable.

The harder he worked the more time he spent thinking about Annie. She became an obsession. His relationship with her had been easier and more satisfying than with any other woman he had ever known. He convinced himself that he had lost a great chance. Annie, he reasoned, was like himself: not class, but classy. Honest, faithful, cheerful, loving—where the hell was he going to find another woman like that? And the salt in the wound was that he had behaved exactly as she had been taught to expect.

As the months went by he had looked for her, scour-

ing every town within reach of his work, hoping to find her every time he walked into some diner, gas station or burger place.

When that didn't work he grew desperate. An acquaintance introduced him to Sherman, an enquiry agent, who agreed to look for Annie professionally, but part-time. Two thousand dollars, Sherman told him, would buy him a pair of eyes and ears all over the State. As he, Sherman, moved about he would look for her, ask about her, wherever his cases took him. To hire Sherman full-time would have been too expensive and this sounded like a good deal. Ritson paid the two thousand and waited.

Three months later he was still waiting. When he went to look, Sherman's office was closed down and the man had vanished.

Then, one night, Sherman rang. He'd looked everywhere, he said, done his best, but needed more money. His voice sounded slurred with drink. On the pretence of calling back if he could raise the money, Ritson took his number. It was a motel near Indio.

Impatient to hear what had been done and what Sherman planned next, suspicious that he was being conned, Ritson took off into the night.

He arrived at the motel one step behind the police. They had been called in by the owner, who was alarmed by the screams coming from Sherman's cabin.

When the police broke in, Jake Ritson was still one step behind them. His enquiry agent, wearing two days' growth of beard and one orange sock, teetered drunkenly over the unconscious body of a young Mexican girl he had beaten half to death.

Jake still wanted to find Annie. One day he would. He had taken the Bowman job on Dirk's primarily because it paid better than anything he'd ever been offered. The money would pay a regular firm of private detectives; one with a reputation, with back-up and a whole pack of operatives specialising in different types of search. It would cost money, real money. But what the hell was the use of the stuff without the only woman he hungered for?

Ritson fell asleep at last, satisfied for the moment that he had plans for the future. When he woke, Brooks had gone.

Down on the beach the scene was remarkable. One group was singing in wine-happy close harmony. A Greek was actually staggering through the Zorba routine in and out of the surf. Collier counted ten men who seemed to have drunk themselves stupid and collapsed on to the sand. He saw Bentinck and Brooks sitting side by side on the hard wet sand immediately above the surf-line, looking out to sea. Others slept, ate, drank. Another substantial group, Wilkie included, was gathered round Bowman who sat atop the dunes like a guru with his flock at his feet. His audience buzzed with interest, once in a while bubbling over into great shouts of laughter. Bowman, it seemed, had the common touch. He was at one with his troops if not with his officers.

Collier picked his way glumly through the trestle tables. At least he could eat. He took a curling, sunburned hamburger from one table, sandwiches from another, and opened a bottle of Californian claret. He felt disconcertingly alone. He wouldn't join Bowman's group, couldn't for the moment intrude on Brooks and Bentinck.

He sat down at the head of the beach, watching and eating. He drank half the wine from a paper cup. Drowsily, he reflected that Dirk's was the weirdest job he'd ever heard of, never mind held. Just before he fell asleep he felt himself to be at the edge of revelation. Many times he had thought seriously about doing something else with his life. Almost always it was when he was confronted with some such scene as this: no option but the rough, tough company of stranded men and impossibly cheerless sites at the asshole of the world. Not just one asshole either, but many, each competing to be nastier than the last. Every last one of them was next to some crummy little town where you felt grateful if they had a movie *and* a bar. This time he was serious about taking Kelso's job. For one thing he wouldn't take Brooks anywhere like this ever again.

The shadows grew longer and men began to drift up towards their cabins.

Bowman began his withdrawal from the island. The launch arrived. The hard-eyed pair in the mulberry-coloured sweatshirts stood by at the bow.

The general came down to the surf flanked by upward of twenty men he had apparently charmed. He smiled and nodded to them like a presidential candidate, finally holding up a hand for silence.

"Don't for one moment imagine," he said in his oddly penetrating voice, "that I don't understand how disturbing these accidents have been. And I'm prepared to compensate you for that." He ducked his head, smiling. "I can't, of course, offer you a bonus for each fatality. You'd all be trying to throw each other down the shaft."

There was a ripple of laughter.

"But I can offer you a bonus for speed. Speed with safety. You probably think I'm a crazy treasure hunter. Perhaps I am. But I want to know what's under this island, and I want that knowledge badly enough that I'll pay a two-thousand-dollar bonus to every man if we can pack up and leave here inside two weeks." He paused to let that sink in, then added, "But it will go down to one thousand dollars if we're here in three weeks' time. If we're still here in a month, of course, you pay me."

This time there was a roar of applause.

Smirking, Bowman turned to the launch. With perfect timing, one of the crew bent to make a stirrup with locked fingers. Bowman mounted easily to the glossy foredeck and stood there, facing the crew, hands behind his back.

With the bow once clear of the sand, the launch backed off, Bowman still standing erect, smiling, obviously well satisfied with his day.

Collier watched, jaundiced, the sun elongating his shadow all the way down to the water's edge. His head still ached, his eyes felt gritty and his face flamed from exposure to the sun and overheated mosquito bites.

18

Maureen Keyes lay on her bed, her face turned from the door, ready to feign deep sleep if anyone knocked and entered. She was fully dressed and it was early afternoon, but she couldn't face anyone until she had thought her problem through. She burned with frustration and embarrassment, not knowing which bothered her most. She needed privacy until she had recovered her nerve and decided on some course of action.

Her trouble began with Collier.

She was stunned by him. She hungered for him, yet was frightened by him. She watched every small interaction between him and Brooks Remsen and was destroyed by her jealousy. She found it difficult even to be civil to Brooks and with Collier himself she wavered between tongue-tied infatuation and burning resentment.

It was hard remembering not to stare at him when he was near her. For a time she had followed him round the camp, rationalising that they were colleagues and that she had a right to be close to the boss. That had had to stop; he had become aware of it, avoiding her when he could. She had also overheard, or thought she had, some pointed remarks about her pursuit of him. But he was always in her mind—an itch, a drug. Even now, just thinking about him, she was flushing like a schoolgirl. She knew she had to shake it off.

Well, she had tried that, hadn't she? Tried to erase Collier by encouraging Terrill, the only man who seemed interested. And that so far, anyway, had proved a ghastly mistake. She moaned involuntarily and tears of frustration welled up under her closed eyelids.

How could she have mishandled Terrill so badly? Over a period of days she had deliberately led him to believe that she

was available, even if Remsen wasn't. And had come close to proving it. Or had she? Would she have fought him off if he had persisted? She couldn't know—her nerve had failed her at the last moment.

If only it had been Collier, she mourned. But that was impossible. With Collier she couldn't do anything right. It wasn't just that she didn't appeal to him—though that, too, was clear enough. Her timing went to hell when she was near him. She began to speak at precisely the same moment he did; what she had to say, useful enough in her mind, came out angrily or fatuously. By now she was permanently off balance and no longer believed she could make any kind of impression on him. Which only made her need more piercing, more unattainably exquisite.

The thing with Terrill had begun as a kind of stupid revenge. Goddam Dr. Alan Collier, she had raged.

She took stock of herself. Her hair and skin were okay but much neglected. Her figure was neat enough. She had the idea, briefly, that with Remsen's help she could transform herself and that someone would look at her twice. Would Collier notice her if someone else did? No, that was a waste of time.

That was how the Terrill thing started, though.

How to do it? She didn't want to be seen as Terrill's next victim, or as the only other woman available. It had to look better than that, even to her.

The trouble was she knew next to nothing about sex. Except that she wanted it—sometimes. Her one close encounter with a male had been at university, with a strange, intense young man who had seemed to want only to touch her, to bury his face in her. He would get her clothes off and then just carry on like that—looking and touching and doing nothing. At last, in a fury of frustration, she had struck out at him and he'd fled.

For weeks afterwards she had endured remorse. Should she have helped him, shown him how? Her regrets and her anguish over how differently she would manage it if he returned overwhelmed her for a long time. But he never came back.

The trouble with men had started then. She couldn't be easy with any man. And it was getting worse all the time.

As for Terrill, she'd begun by smiling at him. That had been a shock for him, poor bastard—no one else did.

It had been a signal for him. After that it hadn't been difficult to suggest, without ever saying it, that she knew the facts about his attack on Remsen had been distorted. That she knew he wasn't that bad.

Terrill had taken the bait at once. They had spoken in soft, friendly terms a couple of times, though Maureen had been careful to ensure that these moments had been either in her own corner of the supply shed or in sight of the camp.

On the second encounter, Terrill had tried to kiss her. Flushed with success, feeling powerful and at last in control, she had pushed him off. At the same time she had managed to suggest that only a matter of geological urgency kept her from submission on the spot.

In her imagination she had completed the scenario a dozen times. Terrill didn't really attract her. He wasn't terrible to look at, but there was something creepy about him. Still, the notion of what he plainly wanted excited her just the same.

Excited, full of temporary courage, she told herself that if she didn't go all the way with some man on an island full of men, then where was she ever going to?

The thought almost made up her mind.

So that when Terrill had found her, an hour ago, perfunctorily labelling core samples in the store, she had been almost ready to surrender. Almost . . .

"No lunch?" he said. "After the first twenty guys in the line the food gets cold."

She had said she wasn't hungry. At that precise moment it occurred to her that for the next half-hour it would be unlikely they could be interrupted. She smiled encouragement but trembled in panic.

"Me, I'm always hungry," Terrill leered. He moved close, put his hands on her waist, slid them down to her bottom, squeezed hard and lifted her off the ground. "Uh-hunnh! You're a cute piece of ass."

Maureen had trouble with her grin. It felt like a grimace

and she could imagine it wobbling right off her face. She breathed hard. This was safe enough. And it wasn't unpleasant.

Still holding her off the ground, Terrill kissed her on the neck. He smelled all right, she told herself. That was something. She suppressed the urge to struggle.

He let her slide down his body until her feet touched the ground. She was relieved—and in the next moment alarmed as he turned her into the crook of his arm and began to unbutton her waistband.

"No!" she tried to insist.

"Nobody's going to come in," Terrill grinned. He slid his hand down her belly.

"Not now," Maureen said breathlessly. "Not here." She wrestled herself round and out of his grasp.

"Where then?" Terrill demanded. He caught her arm and pulled her close again.

Maureen looked wildly about her. "Just not here."

"Your place then?" Terrill said. "After evening chow?"

Maureen, reassured that the moment was not upon her, felt her courage returning. She nodded vigorously, "But let me go now."

So far she had held Terrill off by simply not being anywhere near her cabin then, or alone, or in less than full view of others. Now it was only a matter of time before he called her bluff.

19

It took two days of fevered and abortive labour in the salt-marsh to locate the water-trap inlets which had killed O'Neill and Rosen.

Slowed by the heat and tormented by fresh hordes of

mosquitoes, the crews were forced to clear more than fifty yards of spartina and mud before they could lay bare the inlets—a wide semi-circle of stone mouths, constructed so that they had at one time been scoured regularly by the high tides.

The chain was painstakingly smothered with tons of spoil that would have to be cleared again before the island was finally evacuated. Still Collier was not satisfied. The marsh was difficult to check. Spartina and sea-water covered a great part of it even at low tide. Reluctantly, he ordered the shaft end of the trap tunnel to be sealed from ten feet inward. All other work had to stop while sandbags and cement were rammed into the mouth of the tunnel and shored over.

The process of uncovering the inlets themselves chilled Bentinck. Until now the whole concept of the water traps had represented itself to him as an ingenious puzzle. Not even the deaths of O'Neill and Rosen had entirely dislodged this academic view. Looking at them now, he felt a first touch of fear when he realised that the long-dead mind that conceived the traps was even now pitting itself against him—and winning.

Built at a time when the character of the area was entirely different, they were partly choked with mud, silt and spartina. Clearly, though, enough water constantly seeped through to keep the tunnel filled.

At the end of the first day's work the flow of water into the shaft was down to a trickle. While the bulldozer completed the monstrous, spongy hill, a second gang began hauling the sandbags into the shaft. When the tide returned on the completed work it was safe to proceed with the shaft excavation.

A mêlée of plover, willett and yellow-legs shrieked over the mess in the salt-marsh. "I'm no more happy about that than they are," Bentinck mused.

Collier shrugged. "What use is a shaft I could only work at low tides, constantly pumping out?"

"I only mention it," Bentinck said, "because if the Lands and Forests people see it we'll all go to jail." He told himself

they would put it right in the end, but felt as badly as if he'd written a graffiti on a cathedral wall.

Unmoved, Collier stared off south. "There has to be another trap. The bastard who thought this up isn't going to let us off with just one. But where is it?"

Bentinck shared his exasperation, though the crews had taken the deaths reasonably well. The mess hall constantly buzzed with speculation about the nature of the shaft and the chance of uncovering some kind of chamber. Theories ranged from the ingenious to the ludicrous. One clique was convinced that the workings were part of some forgotten Second World War project. Others, bearing in mind the Oak Island diggings, believed they were on the brink of finding a cache of seventeenth-century pirate booty.

Meanwhile, Terrill continued to preach that the operation was disturbing a secret protected by powerful forces which had so far been responsible for the alarming record of injury and deaths But in a sense Bentinck found Collier's attitude the oddest of all. He, it seemed, had taken in his stride the evidence of the core-sampling, then the revelation that they were re-opening a man-made shaft, and finally that the shaft itself was indeed protected by ingenious traps. But none of this led him to admit that shaft, tunnels or traps were really worth examination.

In the first few moments after the finding of the traps Bentinck had tested him. "So we *do* have what Oak has, after all?"

"That's right," Collier agreed. "Dead men."

"But there has to be *something* down there."

Collier only looked at him impassively.

They walked back to the shaft site with their attitudes unchanged. Wilkie met them half way. "Dry," he announced. "Give me twenty-four hours and I'll bring you down to the limestone table."

"What do we do about other traps?" Bentinck said nervously.

Collier ignored him, but Wilkie explained. "We take it gently. We look for weakness. We rod the walls all the way to see if there's any softness. That don't bother me so much as

what we do when we get on to that goddam stone. What then?"

If Collier knew he wasn't saying. Bentinck gave up and went to see Ritson about the mosquitoes. If the dunes hadn't been so despoiled he would have ordered Terrill to spray the whole salt-marsh. But not now. The birds had been punished enough.

He found the camp master dealing with the last of the *Mulberry Hill* stores. "What about some fires tonight? The wind off the sea might keep the smoke coming through the camp."

"Okay," Terrill said.

Bentinck was irritated. "It was a question as much as anything."

"Choke 'em, drown 'em, what's the difference?" Terrill said. He broke open another case of tinned food, stacked the cans on a hand truck and set about demolishing the case. "This stuff will be useful for fires."

Bentinck nodded. There was an awkward silence. Terrill was the kind of man from whom it was always difficult to take your leave easily. He looked up now and said unexpectedly, "You married?"

Bentinck was baffled. There was something in the man's tone he couldn't identify. "No."

"Is Collier?"

"No, of course not."

"Wilkie? Ritson? Remsen? Keyes?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Is there *anyone* any one of us at all who *is* married?"

Confused, Bentinck turned to go. "I don't know, for Godsake." Without realising it he had picked up Collier's expression. "What difference does it make?"

"What difference?" Terrill echoed. "What difference, he says. This difference Nobody on this island is married Check it out for yourself. No dependents, see? Useful, huh?"

"Oh, balls!" Bentinck snapped. He stalked off. But within a few minutes he was sufficiently nagged by the idea to want to check it out. Could it be true? And if it was, did it mean

anything? Recruitment of the crews was something he'd had no hand in. That had been tackled by Kelso under the direction of Hillier.

When Bentinck told him about the idea Collier refused to take it seriously. "It probably saves on the insurance." Then, "What's Terrill doing about the mosquitoes?"

And when Bentinck stopped to talk to Jake Ritson outside the mess hall, later still, and asked him very casually if he was married, Ritson laughed. "You see what I mean, sport? You've been talking to Terrill."

Embarrassed to be caught out, Bentinck laughed at himself, and widened the conversation.

But later, his thoughts returned to the subject. What Ritson had said was true: Terrill had got to him. What impact was he having on others—those whose daily work exposed them to more danger than he had to face? And whatever you thought about Terrill, there was one nagging fact this time: what he had said was true. Bowman *had* gone to great trouble to recruit men whose death would cause the fewest ripples . . . .

20

An old Woody Allen movie was to be shown in the mess hall after supper, but Collier craved both time to think and time to be alone with Brooks. He excused himself from a noisy crowd who had been drinking beer in the bar corner and set out for the cabins. Wilkie, a well-known long sleeper, ambled alongside him, complaining that by the time the movie was laced up he'd be too tired to stay awake for it.

Smoke drifted in from the south, but the breeze was cooler anyway. Between the two factors it ought to be possible to

sleep with a window open without getting bitten to death. They crossed the tarmac in companionable silence.

Collier had a lot on his mind. Foremost was other water traps. After that, how were the crews going to like real underground work when they started tunnelling horizontally from the bottom of the shaft? Because he didn't believe that anything at all lay beneath the limestone floor. Not least of his major worries was how much longer it was all going to take. The record was beginning to look too much like that of Oak Island. Here they were, in the middle of June, the season dwindling away, and very little to show for the high price paid. He knew he ought in theory to be at least as pleased by the existence of water traps as anxious about them. Didn't they, after all, indicate that they were working on the right lines?

Instead he had a growing feeling that the operation was developing as a contest between himself and a cunning and resourceful adversary. So far the other guy, whoever he had been, was ahead on points. The thought left him rattled and indecisive.

Another shift, too, had taken place in his thinking. Looking beyond Dirk's to his occupation of Kelso's chair—for which he had only Bowman's word—he had begun to wonder if the job could be done at all. And if it couldn't, whether Bowman would renege on his promise. Could it even be done leaving his own reputation intact? He, and Bentinck, and perhaps Wilkie, all knew that the tragedy which had dogged the work so far had not been caused by incaution or incompetence. Luck alone—never before for him a serious factor in so scientific a business as mining—was running against him.

Over and over Collier wished he had long since made the switch to a chairborne job: bought an apartment, played the market with his not inconsiderable savings, put his feet up at the end of the day—instead of having to worry about some lousy hole in the ground and what the next twenty-four hours would bring.

They came up into the street. Ritson stepped from the shadows of the nearest cabin.

"Jesus!" Wilkie complained. "Frightened the goddam

wits out of me. What the hell you doing creepin' around like that?"

Ritson kneaded his right fist into his left hand. His eyes were bright, staring, in the moonlight. "It's Terrill. He's in there." He sounded tense.

Wilkie started. "With little Mo?" He took half a step towards Maureen Keyes's cabin.

"Hold it," Collier said. "What's the trouble?"

"I hear one sound that don't ring right and I'll beat the crap out of him," Ritson said.

"Take your goddam turn," Wilkie growled, watching the door.

They stood there uneasily, uncertain and faintly embarrassed.

Collier wanted to point out that if Terrill was what Keyes fancied there was little anyone could do about it. There was only the sound of the sea and their own breathing. "Forget it," Collier advised. "You're getting the whole thing . . ."

There was a faint scream from inside the cabin followed by heavy footfalls and the sound of objects being thrown about.

Ritson moved first, but before he got to the door it burst open. Maureen Keyes, her hair even more dishevelled than usual, came through it at a stumbling run. Her work shirt gaped open and her only other covering was a pair of pink pants. Her right foot was caught in a pair of jeans and she dragged them behind her as she moved.

She ran straight at them, sobbing. Wilkie gathered her up like a football and tucked her into the crook of his arm.

"Okay, okay," he soothed. He patted her bottom and looked around for somewhere to put her.

Ritson dived into the cabin.

"Here . . ." Wilkie pushed his agitated burden at Collier, who took her with some misgiving. "He'll kill the bastard," Wilkie explained.

"So?" Collier said, but no one was listening. He looked for somewhere to put Maureen, but she clung to him grimly, wailing continuously. Still holding her, Collier's sense of responsibility returned. He looked through the door.

Ritson had Terrill trapped in one corner of the room with

the bed. Terrill hopped up on it and aimed a kick which caught Ritson on the chest.

Ritson grabbed the foot, twisted and brought Terrill down heavily. He fell, struck his head on the floor and lay there dazed. Jake Ritson lifted him easily, steadied him and chopped him neatly behind the right ear with the edge of his hand. Terrill collapsed and lay still.

"You should have been in security," Collier said admiringly. "We wouldn't have needed four guys. Look, Maureen, for Christ's sake, are you hurt or what?" Her snivelling was getting on his nerves.

"Goddam sonofabitch rapist," Wilkie said. He took Keyes from Collier, put her down on the bed and threw a blanket over her. She stopped crying at that and looked around, wild-eyed.

"Wilk," Collier ordered. "Get Ambruzzi over here. I want the cuffs on Terrill and a place to keep him in. This time he stays there until the *Hill* comes to get him." He checked Ritson over. "You okay?"

"Never better," Ritson grinned. "With this freak out of the way maybe things will pick up around here."

"Hold on to him," Collier said. He sighed deeply. "I'll get Brooks across to see to Keyes." Even now he couldn't much sympathise with the woman. She was just someone he didn't much like having around.

Ambruzzi's Jeep, with Wilkie aboard, almost ran him down outside. "I want him nailed up somewhere safe," Collier ordered. "And a guard on him until we can ship him out. Any argument?"

"Not from me," Ambruzzi said.

Brooks, startled by Collier's mission, hurried back with him. "Poor Mo. She's not really big enough to hold off someone like Terrill . . ."

They stopped dead. Ritson was sitting on the porch, holding his head in his hands. He stood up as he became aware of Collier, swaying a little.

"Sorry. He jumped me. He's away and running. Ambruzzi's getting his men out and Wilkie's gone after him down the track . . ." He pointed to the scrub below the camp.

Collier exhaled noisily. Christ! Would nothing ever go right? He pressed Brooks's arm. "Look after Jake, will you? I want to see what Ambruzzi plans. We'll probably have to search the whole goddam island."

Behind him, Ritson was saying, over and over, "I'll kill him, kill the bastard."

21

Terrill was still loose when Ambruzzi reported to Collier in the radio shack soon after midnight.

"No sense lookin' any further tonight," Ambruzzi said, "he can hear us comin' a mile off. All he's got to do is walk over leisurely to the next bush or hump of scrub. In daylight, now, that's another thing . . ."

Collier agreed sombrely. Terrill couldn't go anywhere, but he very much wanted him found by noon. That was the deadline by which his message to Bowman via the *Mulberry Hill* had demanded the helicopter—to evacuate the camp master on the grounds of his assault on Keyes.

"Okay, hit the sack," he said now. "We'll try again at first light. A night in the open may slow him down some."

He showered and got into his own bed, weary of Dirk's Island and all its problems. As he closed his eyes the one thing he tried not to think about was whether Terrill was guilty. There was, after all, something weird about Maureen Keyes. Collier himself had been followed for long enough; and yet she didn't come across as a sexpot. What if Terrill was more or less innocent, and Keyes had simply over-reacted after running Terrill close to the edge? He thrust the thought away. Terrill would go anyway. After the incident with Brooks he could scarcely be given a third chance. He must have known that pushing his luck would lead to trouble.

After an early breakfast three search parties, each of six men with a truck, assembled outside the mess hall. Collier directed that Jake Ritson should take one group along the east coast from the foot of the cliff-climb to the island's most southerly point and that another group, with Wilkie in charge, should work down from the top of the cliff to join up with Ritson in the south. Along with Ambruzzi and his deputies, he, Collier, would take the middle ground, zig-zagging between the two other groups and keeping them always in sight.

For once there was no mist. Climbing slowly, the sun turned the calm sea to hammered, dazzling silver-gilt.

"Okay," Collier said quietly. "Bring him in. But I don't want him worked over. If he gets any bruises he didn't have last night I'll personally beat the hell out of all six of whichever group finds him. On the middle ground we'll wait until we see both groups turning south. Try to stay level with us." He nodded and the other trucks pulled out.

Ambruzzi drove out to the lip of the camp plateau, turned to face north and switched off the engine of the security Jeep. He lit a crumpled Merit and sagged in his seat, his pale blue eyes fixed unwinkingly on the tall pines of the headland.

"How long do you give it?"

Collier raised his eyebrows.

"Before all these guys want out?" Ambruzzi explained.

Collier shifted irritably. "You know something I don't?"

Ambruzzi's mouth seemed to fold inward, making him look like a turtle. There was a long pause while he scanned the ground to east and west. "Know they're spooked," he said tonelessly. "Like a lot of kids. Next time something goes boo it'll only take one of them to break and they'll all be ready to try swimmin' across." He indicated with his chin the blue-tinted outline of the mainland coast.

Ambruzzi's deliberate, unemotional verdict was unsettling. Though he didn't agree, Collier was uneasy that the security man had such a view. What Collier knew of him was good; he didn't seem a man given to exaggeration.

"What about you?" Collier retaliated. "You ready to go swimming too?"

Behind him, Luther stopped whistling through his teeth and broke wind noisily.

Without turning his head, Ambruzzi smiled faintly. "Great turn of phrase, that ol' boy."

Collier pointedly opened his window wide. "Well, thanks for the thought, anyway."

"There you go," Ambruzzi pointed with a gnarled forefinger. The site truck, with Wilkie aboard, had got as far up the cliff as possible and two men were making the climb to check on the northern cove.

When they returned, Ritson had examined the most north-easterly corner of the island and his truck was lining up with Collier's.

For the next thirty minutes Ambruzzi crawled the Jeep expertly back and forth, never losing sight of the other groups even for a few seconds. James and Luther were silent, perhaps resentful of Collier's presence. Ambruzzi said very little, squinting vigilantly through clouds of cigarette smoke, his features crumpled in concentration.

There was no sign of Terrill.

Ahead of them in the south Ritson's truck was drawn up within sight of the sea and his men were prowling the tufted dunes of the coast there. For the moment Wilkie was out of synchronisation and out of sight.

Collier walked over to the other Jeep. Ritson shook his head. "Nothing. Where's Wilk?"

"He'll be here. We saw them get down to check the site hut and the timber stacks."

Wilkie's Jeep appeared now from the east, bouncing heavily over the rough terrain. Moving too fast, Collier thought.

It drew up close, Wilkie himself at the wheel. None of the others was with him, Collier noticed. At once he assumed that Terrill had been found and the five crew had stayed to hold on to him.

Wilkie got down and stomped across slowly. He shook his head at Collier, breathing heavily. "Yeah, yeah, we found him all right." He took off a battered felt hat and whacked the dust off against his leg.

"Thanks, Wilk. Great job. No trouble?"

Wilkie shifted his weight, clapped the hat back on his head. He seemed to have trouble choosing his words.

"No trouble," he said finally. "He was on the bottom of the shaft. Deader'n a hamburger and as cold as Christmas."

22

The news that Terrill was dead rippled through the camp like an electric charge, stunning the crews and stilling the normal lunchtime clamour.

There had been no work on the site because of the search. Some of the men had spent the morning on Falla Beach, others slept in, a few watched the search in sombre groups.

By lunchtime everyone knew. In the mess hall Collier sensed the unrest as soon as he came in. Talk was down to a low rumble, with undertones of discontent. Men fell silent as he passed.

Bentinck, pushing his plate away barely touched, murmured, "No one liked the man, but somehow the idea that he's been overtaken by his own prophecies seems to have got in amongst them."

Collier found he had no appetite, either. "It gets to me, too," he said grimly. "No way did he fall down that shaft by himself. Not even in a panic." He heard himself deliver this verdict with some surprise. He had spoken to no one until now, hoping he could find some other explanation for the death of the camp master.

Bentinck protested, clinging to the idea that there could, just possibly, be an innocent cause of death. "We don't even know exactly what killed him yet."

Collier looked up as Clayton came in brisk and poker-faced. "You want it official—here it comes."

Forty pairs of eyes watched the doctor sit down at Collier's table. "Fractured skull," he murmured. "The *Hill* will be standing off later today. We don't know a time yet, but Hillier will be aboard."

"Fractured skull," Collier echoed softly. "Oh, great. Is that a guess or is it official?"

Clayton looked indignant. "Official. It's the conclusion I usually come to when I find that the back of a man's head feels like a soft-boiled egg."

Collier drew a very long breath. "Terrific. We've had everything else. Now we've got murder." He said it in low tones, rubbing his cheek to screen his mouth. He stared down the frankly curious looks from the table nearest them.

"Hold on, hold on. We don't know anything of the sort." Bentinck looked genuinely shocked. "He could just possibly have fallen down there in the dark."

"Crap!" Collier said between his teeth. "It isn't just a hole in the ground. There's a platform round it. No way could he have missed that he'd stepped up on to that. He also knew every yard of the way to the site. It might have happened if he'd been legless drunk, sure. But he wasn't." He rested his cheek on his hand so that he could talk behind his hand. "Anyway, don't talk me out of murder. The only logical alternative is somewhat worse."

Bentinck and Clayton looked at each other together, emitting sounds of incredulity.

"Oh, come on!" Collier said impatiently. "If, say, Jake—just for the sake of argument—got to him with an axe handle, that isn't so bad. No, wait—*someone* may have done that and not even have meant to crack the guy's skull. Even if he did, he probably thought he had some justification. But what else is there? I'll tell you. We're at the point where even cool bastards like you, Bentinck, are going to have to choose between that and ol' Terrill's brand of crazy. How else can you explain what's happening here? Terrill makes a total of four dead and one maimed. Out of fifty-odd. On a tiny peaceful island? Christ, unless I'm over the edge myself, I'll sleep better thinking that ol' Jake let his feelings run away

with him than that there's something else at work here—the curse of the goddam Aztecs or whatever." He saw both of them about to object and slapped the table, rattling the cutlery and plates. "Godsake! I'd even rather believe someone had it in for Terrill than think that it was just another piece of simple bad luck. How much luck like that can we survive?"

Bentinck, at least, seemed to take the point. He put on his earnest expression. "When you send him out, Doctor, what will be your version for the record?"

Clayton said unconcernedly, "Mining is a dangerous game. Accidents happen. So—the verdict has to be misadventure. Anything else would bring hordes of reporters flocking in here. Bowman wouldn't like that."

"I'll go along with that," Collier said. "But who or what cracked his skull, Doc?"

"The bucket grab, I'd say. It was on the bottom of the shaft. He fell down and struck his skull on it." He looked to Collier for acceptance. "Or the shoring. Or a rock."

Wilkie bustled in and sat down. He took in the mood of the other three, glared the neighbouring tables into submission, and ducked his head confidentially. "What's the word then, Doc?"

"Accident," Clayton said wearily. "Fell down the shaft, hit his head on the grab bucket. By the way, he'll be off the island before the day's out."

Wilkie bent close and whispered hoarsely, "Okay, Doc. I hear what you say and that's how I'll tell it. But just between us it's a load of horse manure. And as of this morning you gotta be some kinda nut to work down that goddam pit."

Collier, nursing a cooling mug of coffee, winced inwardly. It was not, perhaps, the moment to unleash further bad news on his crew boss. He looked Wilkie steadily in the eye. "That's bad news, Wilk. Because we're down as far as we go with the shaft. Further down makes no sense." He paused for emphasis. "Now we got to go horizontally."

Bentinck exchanged astonished glances with Wilkie. "Why?" he demanded.

Collier marshalled his argument. "Something I read about Oak makes sense to me . . ." He tilted his chair back. "Suppose you're the guy who built this whole thing. You dig a shaft as deep as this one, then you bury your goodies in it. Then, when you've done that, you go to twice as much trouble laying ten feet of stone over it and digging tunnels two ways to two different beaches—the idea being to protect what you've buried in the shaft by first building sea traps and then setting them as you withdraw from the shaft. Is that right?"

Bentinck murmured assent. Wilkie simply looked mystified.

"Wrong!" Collier said. "Because when you withdraw from the shaft you leave behind an obvious starting point for anyone to find. Berry found it easily, and he wasn't even looking for anything. Cross-timbers and impacted fill don't make a lick of difference. After a few years there will be subsidence. In a shaft that deep there has to be. And so the fact is that a hand-worked pit is always there to be discovered by the first curious guy who comes along with a couple of shovels."

He looked at them both keenly. "Now why would you do that? You've marked the location for ever. Even if you put the loot under a table of stone, all you've done is provide one more obvious obstacle, but also one more obvious encouragement."

"So where is it?" Wilkie growled.

Collier shook his head. "Who knows? But not under the stone, that's for sure. That's just to wear you out. By the time you get through that the chances are you've exhausted your labour, run out of supplies, the weather's changed and your luck's run out."

Bentinck frowned, faintly sceptical. "So where is it?"

"In another chamber," Collier said. "Maybe. Not so far down. Above the sea-water flow, or off to one side. Look at it another way. Let's suppose the shaft was only dug to help the construction of the tunnels—to provide a shorter route out for the spoil from the digging and to get some air down there. In tunnels that long you'd need air."

Wilkie screwed his face up in concentration. "Then why not shove the gold, the treasure, or whatever, down there in the tunnels?"

"Think about it," Collier said. He wanted to carry both Bentinck and Wilkie with him if he could.

"What was that you were saying about Oak?" Bentinck asked. "And how does it bear on this?"

"There was a cave-in on Oak. Big enough to put a truck in. And along the line of the flood tunnels."

"I don't get it," Wilkie grumbled.

"You should," Collier said. "I've given you enough hints. What about you, Nick?"

Trying to think fast, to follow the logic, Bentinck nonetheless noticed the welcome switch to his first name. It gave him inordinate pleasure.

"Yes," he said. "I think I'm there. Tunnels as long as we have here, or as long as they had on Oak . . . they wouldn't get much ventilation from a shaft at that distance. Right?"

"Right," Collier nodded. "Go on."

"And they obviously didn't have an air pump or a sleeve. So the tunnel or tunnels had to have a through draught." He grinned, suddenly, sure that he was on to it. "So somewhere . . . there's another shaft? And a less obvious one?"

Bentinck blinked rapidly, concentrating. Collier watched him closely. No one spoke.

At last he said. "So . . . the shaft we're in was, in a sense, meant to be found *if* anyone came looking. And to provide a tough time and to kill off or at least discourage searchers. It's all an elaborate and rather deadly diversion." His expression was a mixture of excitement and dismay. "When did you come to this conclusion?"

"The stone," Collier said. "In a way it's too obvious. Once you're down to the limestone, any damn fool can dig a little further and see it's not a natural formation. Just to encourage you, to excite you, it's built in steps, so you can't possibly miss it. Mind," Collier shook his head ruefully, "you got to hand it to the guy. We're here with fifty guys and everything to make it easy, and still he's winning."

Wilkie had listened to this, watching them in turn like a

tennis match. Now he groaned. "Sonofabitch! Nobody is going to like this. We're down at the bottom with three dead men. Now we got to work underground, with our goddam backs to the way out." He appealed to Collier. "You're *sure* it ain't under the limestone?"

"I'm not sure of anything," Collier said. "But what seems reasonable is that the man who planned all this isn't going to leave anything worth a damn under a bloody great marker at the first place you go looking. But if you want to make sure, we'll do it two ways. While we follow the tunnels we'll drill some more holes through the limestone. If it hits air, like in a chamber, or comes up with pieces-of-eight—you can have my bonus. Okay?" He smiled sympathetically.

Wilkie got up heavily. "You telling them or am I?"

"I will."

Bentinck had begun to realise why Bowman had insisted on having Collier and no other. When Clayton and Wilkie had gone he said, enjoying a confidential moment with Collier, "Have you noticed how amiable Clayton's become?"

Collier smiled faintly. "I don't think he has much choice. He's Bowman's man and he's on thin ice. He has his instructions like the rest of us. It may even be worse for him. His death certificates wouldn't stand up to any sort of examination, would they?"

"Huh?" Bentinck was startled.

"Oh, come on," Collier said. "How do you think we haven't had Canadian police swarming all over Dirk's?"

"But there's nothing wrong with the certificates, surely? I mean, what happened to Durrant and the others—those were accidents, weren't they?"

"Oh sure," Collier agreed. "But it's thin, wouldn't you say? Wilkie gets his night ashore, makes his statement and that's it. Hillier, or someone, papers over the remaining cracks. I've asked about Bayliss a dozen times without hearing anything I could believe in. For all I know, Bowman flies our casualties back to the US and gets his rubber stamp there."

Bentinck murmured: "No married men . . ."

"Something like that," Collier nodded. "No fuss, no hold-ups. It frightens me, too, but I want to get on and get out so I don't push it."

Assembled in the mess hall, the crews listened in silence to Collier's plan to move out horizontally from the bottom of the shaft. He had expected some grumbling and a little heckling; that would have been healthy. But when he finished speaking the ominous hush sounded more like the edge of mutiny than acceptance.

"Any questions?" he offered.

They ignored him. Groups put their heads together. One man, Ericson, got up and moved from table to table, apparently testing the consensus. Collier watched patiently. After five minutes or so Ericson had been round the room and came back to his own table. There was more muttering. At last Ericson stood up, self-consciously.

"The guys want off," he announced. "They're through. This place, it's just too much, man. Maybe it's just bad luck, and maybe it isn't." He grinned, embarrassed. "Whatever the hell it is, there's just too goddam much of it."

When Collier said nothing, he added sheepishly, "Hell, man, it's gettting like World War Two. First thing you know, we'll be goin' down the shaft with lucky rabbits' feet."

"What's the problem?" Collier stood up. "The traps are closed. All we got to do is find a ready-made tunnel and drive along it, clearing up as we go." It sounded reasonable, he thought.

"Correction," Ericson got to his feet again. "*We* got to do that. You get to sit on your ass up in the daylight—no offence. Comes to that, even the daylight didn't help Durrant and Bayliss."

There was a rumble of aggrieved assent and Ericson, looking round and apparently gathering confidence, added, "Hell, it ain't just the shaft. Ol' Terrill was right. This whole goddam island *is* weird. There *is* something here and it don't like us being here."

As if faintly ashamed of having uttered something so

illogical and whimsical, he looked around him. "Am I right?" he demanded.

The roar of assent this time was unanimous and beyond dispute.

"Kee-rist!" Wilkie exploded. He leapt to his feet, knocking his chair over. "What a load of horseshit! You're like a load of goddam schoolgirls been spooking theirselves up on Hallow-fucking-een. You want your hands held down the hole? I'll go down with you every goddam time."

He stuck his hands in his belt belligerently and swivelled round, glaring at each table in turn. In tones of chagrined disbelief he went on, "Jeezus! You guys are supposed to be the best there is—hand-picked from the best crews in the game. You been down deeper holes an' nastier holes an' you seen guys get careless and consequently very dead. So what's so goddam special about this mother?" He stuck out his chin. "Too far from home? Maybe we shoulda got a goddam doughnut machine, a PX and a coupla Red Cross broads to sit around listenin' to your asshole complaints?"

"Right!" a wag shouted from the back of the room. But the men at the tables wilted a little. Wilkie was widely respected. There was a moment of recoil and then a fresh outbreak of fierce discussion. After a few moments, Ericson again went round the tables.

When he at last came back to his own table he mimed regret at Wilkie, turned towards Collier. "Wilk has a point," he said lamely. "But the answer's still no."

Collier, poker-faced, said, "You're still under contract, all of you."

Ericson got up again. "Yeah, well we reckon ol' Bowman ain't about to sue every one of us," he said. "Maybe even not anyone. Maybe he still wants this whole thing kept under wraps."

A burst of applause, laughter and jeers.

"All right," Collier said, when the noise had died a little. "The *Mulberry Hill* is due today about four o'clock. I don't suppose it can lift everyone in one trip. Wilk will post a rota, so many at a trip."

The mess hall erupted in a joyous explosion of cheers.

Wilkie, seemingly crushed, still stood. He was flushed and bewildered. He caught Collier's arm as he stood up to go. "I don't really blame 'em," he said. "If they want off they gotta right to go, just like any other camp. But give me a coupla minutes anyway. I'll find you . . ."

Collier nodded and walked out, followed by Bentinck and Brooks.

"So that's that," Bentinck said.

"You want to bet?" Collier retorted. He winked at Brooks mysteriously.

Clayton, absent from the meeting, stopped them in the cabin street. "Terrill is ready to go, and I'll be going along, of course. Wilkie, too, I assume? I've just heard it's all over. That may mean I won't be back." He searched Collier's expression. "Unless you know different?"

"Don't celebrate yet," Collier said.

Clayton looked uncertain, decided not to argue and hurried off to his cabin. Collier wondered if he was already packing.

"I still don't see how he does it," Bentinck said. "I've been thinking about what you said."

Collier paused at the door of his cabin. "Easy enough. When the dead go, Clayton goes, too, right? Where's the problem? A helicopter could lift them right into Bowman country. Probably direct to the Bowman hospital. Where a reliable doctor adds his signature in confirmation."

"But if they died in *Canada*?" Bentinck protested.

"Who says so?" Collier said, amused. "Where would it say that? On the death certificate?"

"Yes, surely?"

"And if the dead man and the good doctor are both safe in Virginia?"

23

Off South Beach a long straggling flight of scoter cruised low above the water. In ones and twos they broke away and hammered down into the surf for periwinkle, starfish and crab. On shore, a cloud of willet flapped and quarrelled over the tidbits in the small mountain of mud, sand and spartina now blocking the South Beach trap-inlets.

Ironic, Collier thought, the sun warm on his back, that now, when it seemed to be all over, there should be such a look and feel of perfection about the island. Azure sky, nickel-coloured sea as smooth as rippled foil, and a temperate, salt-laden breeze, with almost no mosquitoes. Godsake!

He had an odd thought. In a way the island had won. Nowhere else in all his experience had that happened. Always, the crews came and ripped the earth apart with their machines, bored into it, burrowed under it, tore great scars in it, left the contours changed by ugly mounds of spoil and rubble. The earth never won.

Except here.

The aggressive, long-legged willet got on his nerves. He threw a rock at them. They rose, screaming in protest, before settling to feed again.

Cheerful acceptance was what he had been aiming at. He ought to be pleased. Having never wanted the job, it ought not to matter much what had gone wrong. Perversely, some part of his mind worried the facts incessantly, looking for an arrangement he could live with. Had it been mismanagement, sabotage, bad luck—or something else? In the case of Rosen and O'Neill, okay, that *had* been ingenious malevolence on the part of the architect of the Dirk's Island puzzle. But Durrant going out like that—climbing the derrick and hanging himself—what the hell did you call that? And Terrill?

Sitting in the sunshine it was impossible not to reject out of hand the idea that there was some kind of force at work on Dirk's. It was just an island. Green, rugged, peaceful now that the work had stopped. And yet . . .

He shifted so that he lay full length along the edge of the dune. What he ought to have done was bring Brooks out here for a while. With the job at an end they might usefully have talked about where they went together after this. Once the *Mulberry Hill* came there would be much less chance of being alone.

Slickly, without his noticing it, his mind shifted gear again. Maybe they had fallen down on the job in some way. Because nobody initially believed in the project, perhaps they had all performed badly. Someone from outside, someone like Parrish for example, might have been able to see it. Why hadn't he asked for that kind of assistance after the first two accidents? And if he had, might Rosen and O'Neill—Terrill even -still be alive? He winced, closing his eyes, trying to shake off the thought.

Some small creature rustled in the long spartina near his left ear. He listened intently. At one moment he had the sensation that all his senses were peculiarly alive, that he could see and feel and taste everything around him. His mind thankfully made itself oblivious of everything else. The sound of the surf and the cries of the birds filled his head, then receded. After a few moments he slept.

He woke, startled, after what seemed only a few moments. The birds had shifted ground. The sun had inclined more steeply over the island. He checked his watch. He had lost an hour.

And there it was, the sleek outline of the freighter, moving on to station, the red-tipped stack and white aft superstructure unmistakable in the clear air.

Confrontation time, he told himself.

For some reason the crowd on Falla Beach took him by surprise. Sure, the crews wanted off. They'd said so and Wilkie had confirmed it during another gritty exchange after he had left the mess hall. The first batch waited, now, valises and hold-alls packed and ready. Everyone else, by the look of

it, had come to see them go. A small cheer went up as the launch left the *Mulberry Hill* and sped towards the island.

Collier sat down to wait. First Brooks joined him, then Bentinck. "It's perfectly understandable," Brooks said. "But will Hillier understand?"

Collier grunted.

The launch slewed in towards the beach. Hillier, in city clothes as always, could be seen leaning on the stern rail.

The routine went smoothly. Two of Bowman's crew, standing tall like praetorian guards, rode the bow without handhold like surfers. As if at a given signal they jumped down expertly and beached the launch.

Hillier came forward, treading the sand like a man picking his way through garbage.

He saw Collier and halted at once. "How many more men can you kill on this island?" he said languidly. He examined the end of his panatella closely and then, satisfied with it, put it back into his mouth, throwing up his head as if ready for Collier's answer.

"How many have you got?" Collier replied.

Hillier dropped his eyelids with palatine patience. "Your—uh—message suggested that you had another problem."

"More than one," Collier said. He indicated the waiting men. "These guys don't like it any better than you do. They don't trust me any longer. They want to go home."

"Home?" Hillier echoed. "And the suitcases?"

"Are because"—Collier was almost enjoying it—"they're ready to go now."

Hillier smiled a little. "That's impossible, and you know it."

"Fine," Collier said. "I'm sure if you explain that to them . . . why don't you start with Vito there? He's a nice guy."

Vito, a friend of the dead Rosen, was watching the exchange with flinty vigilance, only just out of earshot.

Hillier turned his back on the crews as if to contemplate the distance between the beach and the *Hill*. He said sideways to Collier, "I had no idea it had gone this far. I came to talk

some sense into them. Perhaps make a gesture of some kind."

Collier nodded sympathetically. "Ready when you are, B. H." He turned on his heel, walked halfway up the beach and sat down to watch.

Left at the surf edge, Hillier seemed not to feel at bay. As he turned to face the crowd, hands in his trouser pockets, he might have been about to explain that the next dance would be a ladies' choice.

Before he could speak, Terrill's body, in a home-made casket, topped the dune-edge. It was carried by Wilkie and Ericson at the front and two drillers behind. The men fell silent as the little party trod carefully down to the water's edge. There, the two freighter crew muscled the casket aboard and stowed it safely in the stern.

Wilkie and the others now fell back among the crowd and the freighter men resumed their rigid stance on the small foredeck.

Hillier cleared his throat to speak.

"Bowman-Brace," he said in lazy authoritative tones, "recognise the extraordinary circumstances which have arisen during this expedition . . . and are anxious to assure you of our concern."

There was no interruption, except that Jake Ritson now appeared at the top of the beach and walked down rapidly through the crowd and stood close by. He caught Collier's eye and winked.

Hillier seemed reassured. "General Bowman and indeed the whole board of BBMC heard of this latest tragedy with shock and alarm."

Whoops, catcalls and whistles followed this statement, but there were few smiles.

He glanced in Collier's direction momentarily, then held up a hand in a solemn, oath-taking gesture. "I want to tell you now that the corporation is so distressed by this string of unfortunate accidents that safety experts, recruited from BBMC enterprises all over the world, are on their way here to monitor the work and advise on the most stringent precautions . . ."

A howl of derision from a dozen or more of the men interrupted him.

Hillier, still unmoved, shrugged as if appealing to someone for acknowledgement that he had done his best.

Wilkie stepped forward. "*You* don't understand," he said clearly. "These guys don't want no experts. They want to get in the boat. They quit. And I got almost forty more prepared to wait maybe a day or two."

Hillier smiled, shaking his head. "Impossible," he said. "There can be no question of mass evacuation. No question."

Wilkie blinked. He tilted his head back, incredulously. He looked around for someone, perhaps Collier, and not finding him, took a pace or two nearer to Hillier.

"Now look," he said firmly. "They quit. Understand? And they want off. Today. Now."

Watching, Collier admired Hillier's detachment. He seemed genuinely unafraid and unaware that he had already lost.

Hillier looked behind him and, finding the surf licking at his heels, sauntered a little to his right, closer to the launch. When he had the bow safely at his back he turned again to the beach. "Now listen to me all of you. I think you have misread the situation . . ." A growl of irritation drowned him for a moment. "Yes, and misread it badly. You are all under contract to BBMC. For the whole season of operations on this island. There will not be, cannot be, any evacuation of personnel before then—except, of course, for sickness and so forth."

The roar of rage that greeted this was topped and led by Wilkie's "No!" He turned to his men and, like a conductor, scissored his arms for silence.

"No!" he told Hillier. "Now. Today."

Again Hillier took one step back, this time to lean on the gleaming bow of the launch.

"Read your contract, Mr. Wilkie," he said at last. "All of you. Read your contracts. You signed them. You were glad enough of the generous terms. You will abide by the rest. BBMC undertook to bring you here and to return you Stateside when the job was done. There is nothing in them about

opting out or free transport to the States—except for sickness, of course—before the season is out."

There was a moment of relative silence, then the crowd on the beach erupted. The men who had hoped to leave first picked up their gear and began to move determinedly towards the launch. The rest, jostling and jeering, producing a hostile roar, crowded in behind them. Collier, too, started forward, anxious for Hillier's safety.

Frightened at last, Hillier signalled to the launch crew. In one swift movement, a man vaulted the windscreen into the wheelhouse and emerged holding two identical weapons. He tossed one to his partner who caught it deftly.

The men closest saw it and checked, colliding in a knot. Collier saw it too and was stunned. The weapons looked like the pistol-grip, long-magazined Ingram, the stocks folded. It was unbelievable. Bluff, surely . . .

The crews thought so too. They came on cautiously, incredulous that they were being menaced with real weapons.

As if drilled to it, the two launch men aimed high and fired a short burst well over the heads below them. The awful sound killed all movement immediately.

Before the noise died away, Hillier trod water backwards until the surf was taking him at the knees. He needed a hand from the deck and was willing to wait for it, sure that the launch men had the situation under control.

For a moment it seemed he had won. The oddly martial demeanour of the two launch men had often been noted and discussed. One theory was they were Bowman's personal bodyguard. Either way, they looked both mean and capable, and the crews were reluctant to test them further. In confused groups, they moved back a little, waiting for a leader.

It was Ritson who acted. Tigerishly, he bounded through the surf, wrapped his arms around Hillier, lifted him easily off his feet and waltzed to a safe distance along the beach with him. It was all done in a few seconds.

A slow rumble of approval and delight welled up from the work crews.

Wilkie, moving like a sleepwalker, herded the men back further.

Collier, outraged by the use of firearms, grinned wolfishly.

Ritson now surrendered his captive to the two drillers who had handled Terrill's body. They accepted the Viceroy of the Bowman-Brace empire as firmly and carefully as if he were a fragile antique.

Tension banished, a few laughs began here and there at first, then swept through the beach crowd. It grew. Men slapped each other on the back. One or two reeled about hysterically. Ritson was hugged, wrestled, thumped. It was some time before Wilkie could wash out the uproar with another rigorous semaphore of the arms.

When the men were at last quiet he turned towards Hillier.

"Mr. Hillier," he said respectfully, "I think we got BBMC by the balls. How you want to play this? You talk contracts. These guys talk sense and basic rights. You know they gotta win, even if you sue every last damn one of them they gotta be taken off this place if that's what they've decided. It's your move, but I got to tell you, whatever your answer is, they'll see you're the last aboard that launch."

24

At the wheel of the launch, as it surged out towards the freighter, Bentinck admitted to himself that he was more than a little intoxicated with his role. Excitement and apprehension were a heady mixture which left little room for rational thought.

Under full power, the bow slammed into the wavetops in a succession of jarring thuds which showered the deck with spray. Behind him, Wilkie grumbled, "Hey, you sure you know how to drive this sonofabitch?" And to Collier, "I don't know. We coulda talked just as easy back there."

Bentinck looked back. The launch crew, now disarmed

and remaining as hostages, sat below the lip of the dunes under the vigilant eye of Vito and others. The group dwindled to a stiff tableau as the island receded.

"You've got the cards," Collier said. "You've got his two guys and him." He pointed at Hillier, who lounged unconcernedly in the stern.

"Yeah, but what next?" Wilkie said. He looked doubtfully at the machine carbine he held. Vito had the other.

"Don't ask me," Collier said wryly. "You're playing the Fletcher Christian part. I'm just along for the ride."

"We shoulda talked on the island," Wilkie repeated. He cocked the gun, fired a single shot over the side and sat down, handing the gun to Ericson.

A dozen or more of the freighter's crew lined the rail as they came alongside, Loftus among them.

There was a long delay while Hillier, closely escorted by Wilkie, gave directions to four of the crew who appeared at the foot of the accommodation-ladder to receive Terrill's body. As they reached the freighter's deck the casket was being carried aboard in a sling.

Ericson remained in the launch as its custodian. If negotiations failed, it might become the only means of leaving Dirk's.

"Follow me," Hillier said loftily, his composure restored. He led them to the dining room, immediately below the bridge, and stood aside as they filed in. "I shall need a few minutes to change my clothes," he announced, and left before anyone could object.

"Jesus," Wilkie said. He sat down at one end of the magnificent, railed dining table.

Bentinck sat down too, looking around. The table was twenty feet long, built of sherry-warm yew. Matching chairs, the seats upholstered in sea-green velvet, lined both sides. A captain's chair, taller than the rest, looked down the room towards the stern. The walls, too, were of yew panels. This was Bowman's own ground, Bentinck thought: luxury, and the power it signified. He sensed the initiative slipping away from the men and from Wilkie, their representative.

Collier was watching the deck activity at the huge window.

Terrill's casket was unslung and carried forward with some deference.

Twenty uncomfortable minutes elapsed. The door opened and Hillier, groomed and smiling, marched in. Behind him, General Bowman appeared, poker-faced. He took the tall chair at the head of the table.

"This is outrageous," he said, addressing himself to Collier and Bentinck. But his tone held more concern than outrage.

"Absolutely," Collier agreed. "Holding men against their will on an island. Shocking. Unprecedented. And no doubt actionable." He turned to grin at Wilkie. "That's your case, isn't it?"

Hillier looked bored, but Bowman smiled thinly. "And what were you planning to do about the men's breach of contract, their refusal to work, their kidnapping of two of my crew?"

"Me?" Collier looked astonished. "Not a damn thing. I'm a mining consultant, not a work boss. Now Wilkie here, he may have something to say."

Wilkie looked uncomfortable. Before he could speak, Bowman drew a long breath. "I suppose they want more money?" he said.

"No. They want off," Wilkie said flatly.

Bowman drummed his fingers on the tabletop. He stared past them all at the gently rising and falling stern. "I could come and talk to them," he said. "We could afford to send out some more, uh, comforts, I suppose."

Bentinck moved to establish his own position. "No, sir. What Wilkie says is no less than the truth. They want to get off the island. At this stage it is unlikely that any financial inducement, any degree of extra 'comforts' or any kind of persuasion would induce them to remain. They're disenchanted, rattled by the incredible accident rate and more than half convinced that there's something, well—supernatural about the shaft itself or, perhaps, the whole island."

Bowman listened as if Bentinck were an interesting stranger. He fingered his small moustache. At last he said, "What, then, do we do?"

He appeared to be conceding the difficulty and asking for advice. Collier and Bentinck exchanged glances of astonishment. Bentinck was troubled by this reaction, but couldn't have said why. He had never before seen his employer surrender to any conflict of interests.

"Pay them off," he said emphatically. "If we keep them on the island one day beyond their willingness to stay, we shall have an explosive situation on our hands. Certainly their contracts may not explicitly give them the right to transport to the US at will, but anything less is going to drag BBMC through the courts."

"I thought you were paid by BBMC," Hillier snapped. "You sound like a union lackey."

"The publicity, once these men finally get off the island, would make BBMC a laughing stock or worse," Bentinck insisted.

Hillier adopted an expression of contempt. Bowman almost smirked. "What guarantee do I have that this won't be all over the newspapers anyway?"

Collier's astonishment grew. Again he looked at Bentinck, disbelieving.

"Pay them off," Bentinck answered. "And pay their bonuses. Get them to sign an undertaking not to discuss the activities of the company on this or any other site. It wouldn't really hold water, but it might deter most. Backstop that by keeping them all in company employ at once. Disperse them to sites across the whole range of BBMC activity."

Disgusted, Hillier made a sound like someone spitting on a hot stove, but he was ignored.

"So we give up Dirk's Island?" Bowman said resignedly. He bent his head, digesting his disappointment.

Against all reason, Bentinck felt sorry for him. He heard himself say, "I'm willing to stay."

Bowman gave him a look of limited gratitude.

After a moment, Collier nodded. "I'll stay."

Bowman's head came up and he looked from one to the other keenly. "How does this help us?"

"The shaft is finished anyway," Collier said slowly. "The only chance of finding a vault or chamber is by searching the

two tunnels which connect it to the water traps " He explained his theory, to which Bowman listened attentively.

"At this stage," Collier argued, "there isn't a lot to be done. The traps are sprung and the inlets covered. So we're safe from flood for now. If there is a chamber at all, the tunnels must yield further evidence of it at some point somewhere along their length. Nothing else makes any sense. So while they have to be opened up and cleared out a little, it's exploration we need now rather than a reserve of muscle."

Bowman nodded, waiting

"Two tunnels," Collier repeated. "The upper and the lower, dug from different beaches to empty into the shaft at two different levels . . ."

"So?" Bowman's patience and attention seemed quite extraordinary to Bentinck, who had never seen him in such a receptive mood.

"So we would need no more than four or five men," Collier said.

Bowman began to smile. He took in Collier's point like a warming medicine. "Then we don't really need the crews any longer?"

"Not if I'm right, no." He shrugged. "But it's only my theory. I could be wrong and you will have wasted still more money."

Bowman waved away the consideration with a return of his old impatience. "This handful of men—to include?"

"Myself, Bentinck, maybe Ritson. Wilkie here, if he'll stay." He chewed the inside of his lip with amusement. "If we need more, you could always get the computer to sort out two or three more guys—unmarried, no relatives, no commitments."

Bowman locked glances with him only for a moment. He wasn't prepared to fight. "We should get Miss Remsen off the island, too," he said decisively.

"Miss Remsen," Collier said coldly, "will make up her own mind."

No one had asked Wilkie if he would stay

"What about commissary people?" Bowman wanted to know. "Drivers, services, the equipment?"

Collier thought about it. "Only about two of us will be able to get into a tunnel at a time. Whoever isn't down there looking for the chamber can look after the generator and cook the meals. Besides, if I'm right, what remains to be done can be done in a very few days. We either find a chamber or we don't. If we don't, you take us all up without delay and we get paid what was agreed. If we do find a chamber we break in and find something—or nothing. Either way it's up to you at that point."

Bowman stood up. "Why are you doing this?" He sounded almost grateful.

"I can't speak for Bentinck here. I took the job. I may never take another. I may as well finish this one. What these guys do is up to them."

"Yeah," Wilkie allowed. "I'll stay."

Bowman strutted the length of the green Turkey carpet, recovered his military poise and permitted them a near-smile. He held up a detaining hand, already forgetful of how suddenly the situation had changed and anxious to attempt conditions. "One thing," he said. "You *must* call me as soon as the chamber is located—and *before* you break into it."

Collier's expression suggested barely repressed amusement. "Oh sure," he said carelessly.

Bowman's tone tightened at once. "I must insist on that," he said formally. Then, as if remembering his part, gestured apologetically. "To be there at the very moment of finding . . ." he shrugged, shook his head. "A great moment, whatever is found."

They had forgotten Hillier. He stood up now. "Perhaps," he suggested deceptively quietly to Bowman, "we ought to put a man on the island. Someone we can *rely* on to come through to us if such a chamber is found."

Collier swung on him. "I'm in charge on Dirk's," he said firmly. "You'll get the message if your men stand a proper radio watch." And to Bowman, "I'll have no one on Dirk's that I haven't worked with and trusted."

"I don't quite see your anxiety," Bowman said, pained. "But I'm willing to accept your assurance that nothing will be done about breaking into a chamber until I arrive."

"You've already had that," Collier said.

Bentinck had listened to these exchanges with a growing sense of confusion. Internationally renowned as an unyielding tyrant, Bowman had now several times surrendered without much of a fight. It was true that he didn't have a workable alternative but to accept what Collier had proposed. Equally, it wasn't in the man to compromise or to express, even as obliquely as in this interview, either gratitude or pleasure.

Had he, until now, been reading Bowman ineptly? If Collier's theory was correct, Bowman stood to gain enormous kudos from cracking the mystery of Dirk's Island, even if there was nothing of value in the vault—if and when they found it. But though Bowman had fame and honour enough already, Bentinck had just watched the man bend way back to please a man he didn't like, a work boss entirely without status, like Wilkie, and an aide who, until minutes ago, had expected to be received at best as an abject failure and at worst as a mutineer.

He wanted to discuss it with Collier—and soon, while it was still strongly in his mind. In one way it was academic, maybe, that he had failed to see in Bowman a bigger man one who was able to bend, retract, adapt. It was already too late. While they were here he had some business of his own to conduct. The relationship between himself and Bowman was irretrievably damaged. It hadn't been much of a thing, but it could not now be revived to work under normal circumstances and he wanted to make the break now, while his resolve held.

"There is one other thing I ought to say at this point," he announced nervously.

Bowman's chin lifted towards him, amiably.

"When this is . . . over," Bentinck began. "I shall be re signing." He was tempted to leave it there, but pride pushed him on. "No way can I work for the kind of company which attempts to use armed force to suppress the quite proper indignation of a work force or coerce it to remain on the job." It was quite a pompous little speech, he realised. He blushed deeply, and desperately wished he had it back to re-work and re-present. Yet he was quite pleased with

himself. It was too bad that this was to be the end of the money he and Wendy had relied upon. They would both have to wait a little longer.

There was a long awkward pause. Bowman said nothing, simply nodded. Hillier smiled sardonically.

Bentinck was crushed. He'd expected Bowman to argue, override him, even attempt to placate him. Instead it had fallen flat. Bowman seemed totally unconcerned. It was humiliating.

Collier, though, clapped him on the back. "You ready, Nick?"

Bentinck, feeling just a little taller than when he'd come aboard, said he was.

PART THREE

THE SHAFT

25

The last of the crews had gone. Bentinck stood on the north cliff, watching the freighter turn. By some trick of the light the white superstructure vanished momentarily, leaving the red-tipped stack bobbing clear of the main deck.

The weather still held. Like everyone else he had angry mosquito bites on his face, neck and arms, but he felt more fit, more alive and more able than he could remember. He was tired, but then so was everyone. In their final two days Collier had driven the dwindling crews hard in a frenzy of test drillings along the course of the two flood tunnels. Now they had to manhandle the short drilling rig themselves. A fifth drilling was in progress, with Wilkie and Collier handling the drill. He could hear the distant roar of the diesel even up here.

He lingered, watching two schooners from some mainland port like Sheet Harbour as they raced across the Canso Bank towards the Cabot Strait. Nothing quite like them was used in England, yet there was something nostalgic about the sight. He half-closed his eyes and teased himself with the thought that he could be standing on a Kentish cliff looking out across the Channel or the North Sea, drubbed by an identical breeze.

He turned away reluctantly. He wasn't needed while the drill ran, but he had to run the fresh water pumps, make another check on essential stores and hustle some diesel fuel out to the site. Brooks and Maureen—who had elected, surprisingly, to stay—had taken over the cooking. They might need something done.

Picking his way down the path, Bentinck brooded on his new status. As soon as something happened here, successfully or not, he was through with Bowman-Brace. More impor-

tantly, he was through with Bowman. There was no way back from that decision. He had ranged himself with Collier from the moment of Hillier's action in arming the launch crews. Bowman may not have ordered it, but he hadn't sought to excuse it. His arrogance, bullying and deviousness had been hard to take before; but guns against miners was something over the edge.

He found Brooks in one corner of the big kitchen, using a fraction of its potential, like Buster Keaton in *The Navigator*. She was, she announced, making chowder from clams brought in fresh by Ritson that morning and was determined not to fall back at once on the canned or frozen supplies. Maureen, hovering impotently, told him cheerfully, "I'm more in the way than anything." When no one denied it, she added artfully, "The trouble with the sciences is that you don't get much chance to practise all this womanly stuff. God, that smells good! Next time I'm really going to watch."

"You're terrific, Brooks," Bentinck told her. She was looking more beautiful than ever. The wind had long since banished her pallor and her careful coiffure, but with her pale hair tied back the subtle beauty of her face was more evident. If Collier let her escape he was a fool.

The mess hall needed nothing. He refuelled the generators, worked the pumps and drove the diesel truck out to the site in time to see the drill coming up.

"Let's take a break," Collier said. Wilkie stepped back one pace and comically fell full length on his back, arms flung wide. "My party trick," he explained to a startled Bentinck. Then, coming up on his elbows, squinting against the sun, "Not a goddam thing. The same sonofabitch rubbish we got from the last four holes." He turned to Collier. "Ain't that right?"

"Right!" Collier agreed.

"So?"

"So we sink some more." Collier consulted a diagram he carried on a clipboard. He paced off a few yards to the south and east. "About here, next. But we'll need you and Jake to help get the rig shifted."

Delighted with her new role, Brooks served them the chowder, assorted cold meats, potato salad, fresh fruit salad and ice cream. She had set a table for six close to the counter where she had stacked cold beers.

"I wish we had the makings of a green salad," she said. "I'm good with salads."

"You certainly look appetising," Collier agreed.

It was odd, the six of them eating in a room built for fifty. Like having a picnic in Grand Central, Collier thought. And yet it was cosy. He began to relax for the first time on the island. He wondered about that, deciding it was because he at last felt himself to be among friends. And that included Bentinck, for God's sake!

Bentinck asked about the next test drilling and how many more there would be. Collier grinned and admitted he had no idea.

"Let's try a couple more. If we get no sign of anything we'll open up this end of both traps and start looking around for signs."

"Signs?" Jake said.

Collier hunched his shoulders. "Anything. Some difference in the construction, something that breaks the pattern. A larger slab of rock, maybe. Or an odd-shaped one. Something that could be described adequately and recognised by someone else from that description."

They looked at each other, baffled.

"I'm only following logic," Collier said, almost apologetically. "We know we have a couple of long tunnels and a kind of grand entrance—the shaft. And we know that nobody dug them for fun. Next, because whoever designed all this took the trouble to turn the tunnels into water traps, we can assume that he built them as a deterrent to some group of people who might come looking for whatever is down there. Agreed?"

They nodded in unison.

"Right. So we presume it's something worth looking for, and something bulky enough to have required that much labour. Where does he put it? In the shaft? Hardly, for the reasons we've already examined. In the tunnels? No, because

we have already presumed that it's bulky. Something that bulky might, with bad luck, block the tunnels, so allowing them to silt up and take them out of action as water traps. In a chamber, then, built into the wall of one of the tunnels? No, because the same dangers apply. The action of the water might in time crumble the wall, fill the chamber, and undermine the whole thing.

"The logical place would be a purpose-built chamber pitched above the run of the water, but reached by one tunnel or the other."

Only Wilkie looked doubtful about this. "It's probably a goddam tomb," he said morosely.

Collier grinned. "Not impossible." When Brooks let out a small groan, he added: "But not very likely. There isn't, that I know, a civilisation that took the trouble to build tombs for their important dead—on foreign soil."

Brooks cleared the chowder bowls and they started on the salad. When they were all served, Bentinck said, "Go on . . ."

Collier laughed, shaking his head. "For all I know this is all pure fantasy. I love the trust you have in me . . ."

At once they protested vigorously.

"All right," Collier said. "What else can we presume? With some certainty we can say that neither these workings nor those on Oak took less than months, possibly years, to prepare. For what? We don't know. But we do know that it doesn't make sense if it wasn't bulky, immensely valuable—otherwise it wasn't worth all the trouble—and not wanted above ground for a while . . . perhaps a very long time."

He ate a little of his salad, marshalling his thoughts.

"So what they built here is a kind of safe. Containing something valuable. And it has to be secret. You agree? If not secret, why not put it in a tower and put a guard round it? This island, and Oak, are evidence of secrecy in themselves. This was Indian country. No Indians built this kind of vault. It's just not within the scope of their culture. White man, then? Early white settlers? Again, unlikely. They were poor, for the most part. And they wouldn't have buried anyone in such laborious secrecy."

As Collier paused to attack his food again, Bentinck mused, "It also suggests not only secrecy but a secret sustained over a period of years, doesn't it? I mean, if it took months or years to build, we're not talking about any group who wanted to retrieve what they hid after weeks or months . . ."

"That's the way I read it," Collier agreed. "And the next natural assumption is that what they hid they meant to dig up again when they could repossess it without the need for further secrecy—when circumstances had in some way changed." He looked up, keen to carry them on a further point. "Even if that meant that, after a sufficient number of years, it would be an entirely different set of people doing the reclaiming."

"I'm lost," Bentinck said. "Can we take it slowly?"

Collier sighed. "Okay, step by step. First, does anyone want to contest that the workings here must be the same age as those on Oak? Reasonable? Next, what they hid is immensely valuable, either intrinsically or peculiarly so to them—as it might be if it were some religious stuff. Agreed? Okay, now what sense would there be, either in letting everyone who worked here leave the island with a secret which is then no longer a secret, or in allowing the secret to die with one or two special people? Hell, in those days the expectation of life wasn't great."

He pushed his plate away and lit a cigarette. Through a cloud of smoke, he said, "The real likelihood is that only a few people were allowed to walk away from the island knowing what was put here and how you got to it, and to make any sense at all they had to pass on that knowledge at some time."

Bentick was sold on that. "Right. That must be right. The shaft and tunnels must have needed a huge labour force. As you say, like the Egyptian tomb builders, the labour force had to die before they left or on the way home."

The thought somehow created an odd mood around the table. Brooks shivered.

Maureen Keyes said sourly, "My God, you've come a long way, Alan. You were the one who insisted the idea of treasure was a load of crap."

If Collier was irritated he didn't show it. "The evidence has been building," he said. "Even now I don't know a damn thing. I'm just reading the signs like everyone else."

"Another thing you said," Bentinck offered, "seems to make sense. That it might not be the same people doing the reclaiming. I see now what you meant by a sign of some kind in the tunnel workings. Something that *someone else* could recognise from a description." He shook his head, amused. "Maureen's right, though. Can this be the same Collier I tried to pitch a treasure story to only last winter?"

"I suppose I knew it all along," Collier confessed reluctantly. "Once I saw the trouble that Bowman had gone to. The day I stepped ashore here and saw the camp, the crews and everything, I knew then that Bowman wasn't playing games on the advice of an old loony."

"Huh," Brooks objected. "That old loony was checked out like an astronaut. Alex had him in a clinic for a week. Before he undertook his part of the deal he had Berry taking lie-detector tests, and checked him over with psychiatrists to make sure he wasn't off his trolley. In the end he was satisfied about one thing: that there was at least as much to this island as there was to Oak. But there were two important differences. He could lease the whole of it; and it hadn't been dug-over for two hundred years like Oak."

"I didn't know that," Bentinck said.

"You know Alex," Brooks laughed. "He tells everybody something, everything to nobody."

Wilkie, who had listened enthralled so far, now said, "I still don't see why we've got to fool around drilling holes. The traps are closed. Let's get down like dogs and start crawling around looking. If there's got to be a sign, why do we need the holes?"

"There's an awful lot of tunnel," Collier reminded him. "If you could hit an unnatural void from the top—the vault—with the drill, you'd be that much less time on your knees."

"Okay," Ritson said. "Why both tunnels? One has to be more logical than the other, surely?"

Collier looked interested. "Maybe. But trying to think like the architect of all this is tricky. I'd guess neither is more likely, though. You have to think clever—but only up to a point. He hopes the guys who first try to find his bank are stupid and will drown in his water trap." Sombrely, he remembered Rosen and O'Neill. "But just in case they don't he builds a second. If that doesn't finish them, he reckons they'll attempt to pick-axe it through the limestone and run out of food, water, energy—something. No? They're still alive and trying? Well, by then they may guess that the stuff isn't in the shaft at all, but farther away. Let's say they reason the same way we do. It's a vault, not in a tunnel, but reached by one. But which? This guy is some thinker. He's been dead three hundred years but he's still outguessing us. Now, perhaps, he hopes we'll go for the most difficult tunnel—the one to the South Beach, just because it's longer. So he sticks the stuff close to the smaller one. I don't know."

"Jeezus," Wilkie breathed. "Let's get down one of them. I begin to smell money."

"It belongs to Canada," Ritson reminded him, amused.

"It belongs to Bowman," Bentinck corrected. "He didn't go to all this trouble so the Canadian Government could spend his Aztec gold on reducing the national debt."

Collier looked at him sharply. "You think so?"

"Nick's right," Brooks murmured. "What Alex has, Alex keeps. That's his philosophy of life."

26

With only four of them, manhandling the drilling derrick was rough and dangerous work. When the big tripod was finally in position, about thirty feet to the east, Wilkie went

up to rig the pulley while the others collapsed in the scrub, breathing heavily.

"Just a hunch, eh?" Ritson panted. "I hope you know more than you're saying, sport."

"I don't," Collier confessed. "But we've been down to tunnel depth either side and at forty feet and sixty feet out along the line. If it ran out towards the beach we would have hit it before." He produced a cracked laugh. "Unless, of course, it's a lot nearer in or a lot farther away."

"Oh, brilliant," Ritson said. "It should be here. Unless it's somewhere else."

Bentinck, flat on his back, screwed up his eyes against the sun. "It does have some kind of sense, though. Imagine the kind of size it must be. We're not trying to hit a biscuit tin. It would have to be, what, at least twenty feet square?"

"Who knows?" Collier said. "But your idea is right. The dimensions of the vault or chamber do have to be taken into account. Look, if it was twenty feet square, as Nick says, and it didn't show up on the earlier drillings, then we can move ten feet back along the line, and the same distance east from the tunnel and not miss it. Move the drill more than that and you could leap it entirely."

Ritson sat up, cross-legged, and brooded over this with his eyes tight shut. After a while, he wanted to know, "Why not farther out from the shaft. Say a hundred feet or a hundred and fifty?"

Anxiously aware that everything they did from now on was precariously based on his own say-so, Collier was grateful for Bentinck's answer.

"You're forgetting," he told Ritson, "that we've decided the shaft is only a facility—a way out for the spoil and a way in for the stone and mortar and air supply. A hundred feet is a long way to drag the stuff. So nearer is more likely."

Collier was surprised by the warmth of his new cordiality towards Bentinck. He was willing to admit to himself that he had underrated the man and was ready to show it by degrees. Once or twice during the day he even found himself wondering why Bentinck and Brooks hadn't made a team. The old Bentinck, of course, might not

have dared steal her from Bowman. Was that the only reason?

The evening meal was more snug and friendly than ever. They praised Brooks's cooking and lingered on in the mess hall, talking, laughing, drinking beer. Wilkie was seen to have an arm round Maureen's shoulders. Ritson told jokes and did creditable impressions of Bowman and Hillier, then Fonda and Cagney.

Brooks and Collier washed up alone. He asked her about her affection for Bentinck and why it had never become anything more.

"He was my first real friend in New York," she told him. "We both wanted just that, nothing more. On his side, anyway, there was Wendy. Do you know about Wendy?"

Collier, adjusting, shook his head.

"He told me about her one night at dinner; he's in love with her," Brooks was saying. "And she wants to marry him but won't divorce her husband until her youngest is safely into board school." She smiled fondly. "Which is just as well because Nick has no idea what he's going to do about his mother and sister, who depend on him. But that's another story . . ."

She returned to the dishes. "Anyway, Nick wasn't interested in me. But we began to go out a lot. It was the sort of thing a sensible girl jumps at: a shoulder, an ear, an arm always there. From Nick I got advice that I knew wasn't generated by the usual self-interest."

Outside, the camp lay in the moonlight like a ghost town. The big light over the store was out—they were saving not fuel but generator chores. The cabins were dark. The others, exhausted, must have gone straight to bed.

They walked across slowly, enjoying the soft, evening breeze. Something prompted Collier to say, drily, "He didn't advise you against Bowman, though . . .?"

She stopped at once and hung on his arm. "I didn't ask him," she said. "And he only gave advice when I asked. Alex was my own folly entirely. That's it. No apologies."

"Godsake!" Collier whispered hoarsely. "I couldn't justify three parts of my life. You won't ever hear a word out of

me except gratitude for having found you. Not a goddam word."

He enfolded her for a long time before they remembered that they were on the step of his cabin and that it would be more decent to move inside.

27

Tunnel One to the salt-marsh inlets, or the longer Tunnel Two out to South Beach? Wilkie and Ritson, drilling in the spot to which the derrick had been moved, stopped work to watch the toss of a coin decide it

It came down heads: Tunnel Two.

"Okay, while you're playing with that," Collier said, "Nick and I will go out to South Beach and check the inlets first. Then we'll get the trap open at the bottom of the shaft and see how far we can get without you."

The tide was usefully on the turn, already lapping round the spoil mountain dumped in a fan pattern across the entire tideline reach. They watched for a while, wading round carefully. Nowhere would the odd, rock-lined mouths of the inlets be exposed or even threatened by the tide. It would hold. Satisfied, they hurried back to the shaft.

"If it's safe now it's safe through the day," Collier said. "Give me lights, pumps and air. While you're getting that ready, I'll rope up."

Bentinck hesitated, as if he might argue that he, too, should go down, then turned towards the machinery lined up at the edge of the platform.

Collier was standing on the lip of the shaft, ready to descend, when there was a shout from the derrick. Maureen hurried across. "We've hit air – yards of it," she said breathlessly. "What do we do now?"

Collier hesitated only briefly. "Keep going. Feed down more pipe. It could be a vault or it could be just an air pocket." He climbed into the grab bucket. "What else is there to do?"

On a sign from Collier, Bentinck winched the bucket off the ground, let it swing out steadily over the middle of the shaft and began to ease it down. Collier vanished.

"Keep an eye on him, will you?" Bentinck shouted to Maureen. "If we lose him we might just as well jump down the hole ourselves."

She stretched out on the platform, her elbows over the edge, her hands shielding her eyes. "Starting to chip out the packing now," she reported, her voice barely audible above the racket. "Some water, but that's natural enough."

Bentinck started the pump and in a few moments salt and scummy waste from the shaft bottom was flowing out behind them.

For half an hour nothing happened. The noise from the drill, pump and generator was soporific. Bentinck had to shake his head repeatedly to stay alert. He kept his eye on Maureen, inelegantly sprawled at the lip of the shaft, her toes digging into the boards.

He didn't hear the drill stop, wasn't aware of Wilkie at his elbow until a big hand smacked him in the middle of the back. "Bring him up!" Wilkie bawled. "Right now!" He hurried across to the shaft to shout at Maureen and down the shaft.

Bentinck cut the pump and generator. When Wilkie gave him the sign he brought Collier up, his clothes sodden and filthy, his head and shoulders plastered with mud and salt. At the same moment the Waggoneer bounced in from the camp with Brooks at the wheel.

"Coffee!" she called, unaware.

"Never mind the coffee," Ritson said. "We got thirty feet of void, then stone floor. Isn't *that* something?"

Collier frowned. "Who says it's a floor? Let's see the samples."

The first core barrels were laid out to the rear of the derrick, unexamined. They crowded round. Maureen got down on her knees, taking it slowly, foot by foot, examining,

feeling, rubbing the samples between finger and thumb. Collier, impatient, looked carefully and dismissed the first and second barrels. The third, from thirty feet down, seemed to galvanise him. He, too, got down on his knees, poking and rubbing.

He stood up at once, shaking his head. "How for Godsakes can you drill through two feet of limestone and not notice the difference?" he yelled, grinning.

Maureen confirmed it. Either Wilkie or Ritson had drilled on through rather more than two feet of solid limestone at about thirty-one feet.

The same thought hit them all at the same time. They raced across to the derrick. "Bring it up, bring it up," Collier ordered. Wilkie restarted the diesel. The hawser whined through the sheave, the drill began its rise. Collier, Bentinck and Ritson scrambled for gloves.

The core barrel was detached and laid out for inspection. Bentinck cut the diesel again and watched, anxiously.

"Oh God!" Maureen squeaked. "What do you think? We've done it. We've found it. Look at this!" Her voice had risen to an hysterical shriek. She snatched at the barrelling.

The upper part of the core was empty. Only in the last few inches was there a trace of the same limestone. But on Maureen's palm, as she opened her hand, amid a tablespoonful of wet limestone grit, gleamed unmistakable tiny fragments of gold.

For a long time no one seemed able to speak. They stood in a tight group, unbelieving, reaching out in turn to finger the bright crumbs in Maureen's grubby palm.

"Yeah, well—" Wilkie said.

They all looked at Collier. Maureen held the fragments close up to his face in a gesture of triumph. He was puzzled. All his logic hadn't prepared him for success. It was a moment or two before delight overcame his astonishment. He began to grin. They all grinned. Collier found it difficult to get his mouth together to form words. He cleared his throat, stood up straight and sucked in a long breath.

"Okay," he said with an attempt at nonchalance. "We found it."

As if waiting for his confirmation of what they could see for themselves, they at once began whooping and laughing. Bentinck grabbed Brooks and began a ludicrous jig. Wilkie snatched Maureen off her feet and did the same. Ritson watched, smiling broadly like the rest, but somehow not a part of their celebration.

Collier watched, too, until they subsided.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" he said seriously. "There's a lot to be done. All we know is it's there. Now we have to find a way in." They looked at him, hurt. Feeling the need to justify a sober attitude, he added, "Let's not get carried away. This is the stuff people go crazy over. It turns good men into villains, breaks up homes, starts mass migrations." He grinned at them encouragingly, opened his mouth and whispered, "Ya-hoooo!"

28

Bentinck stood on the mark of the final, successful drill-hole, his feet on a surveying tape. Wilkie did the same at the lip of the shaft. Collier, moving along the probable line of Tunnel Two—assuming it to be fed from South Beach—pulled Wilkie's tape out and bisected it with Bentinck's.

"No more than twenty-five feet," he announced, shaking his head admiringly. "You've got to hand it to this guy. Where's his bank? Right here at the start, almost, where you'd least expect it and be most likely to overlook something like a marker."

"C'mon, c'mon," Wilkie urged. "Let's go." He hustled over to the grab bucket and climbed aboard. "Jake, let us down, huh?"

Agreeably, Ritson stood by on the crawler-crane. "Just until you crack it, sport." He started the motor.

"Good of you, Jake," Bentinck murmured, wishing he had volunteered to work the crane himself. He climbed reluctantly on to the grab.

The bucket lifted, then swung out over the shaft. Collier blew a kiss at Brooks. Maureen, not to be left out, dropped to her knees at the edge of the platform and yelled, "You watch it now, Wilk, okay?"

As they whirred smoothly down, Bentinck eyed the walls of the shaft nervously. The shoring looked safe enough now and they wouldn't be subjecting it to any strain. The crews had worked on it at length and Wilkie had approved it. Mud still lay thick on one or two of the braces, but he told himself it wasn't ooze from the earth behind so much as mud driven up during the flooding.

Farther down, where no daylight reached, it was difficult to see beyond the close-to glare of the string of lights to the darkness behind the shoring.

The bucket jolted on to the floor of the shaft. Bentinck climbed out with a show of eagerness he didn't feel.

With the bucket lifted again they could get down and look into the tunnel mouth. It gaped eerily, still oozing mud and a trickle of water. Bentinck put his head close to the dark aperture. It breathed a dank, chill halitosis.

For a few minutes they watched while Wilkie worked with a shovel on the last of the seal, chopping round the edges to reveal the original shape.

It was rectangular and that surprised Bentinck. He had somehow expected a circular drain. He commented on it cheerfully. "Easier to keep the dimensions consistent, I guess," Collier speculated.

Bentinck was still grappling with that when Wilkie, on hands and knees, bent and disappeared into the black mouth, followed by Collier.

He watched Collier's legs disappear. Left alone, he fought to subdue sudden panic. He had never before felt any claustrophobic tendency, but then he'd never been in any situation like this. He braced himself and crawled forward into the tunnel.

The light from Wilkie's and Collier's helmet-lamps,

probing forward and all but blotted out by their bodies, barely reached him. Behind, the shaft lights penetrated only a few feet. When that was gone, he stopped, his terror mounting.

For a few moments he edged forwards that way, halting when his panic seized him. The roof seemed to press down on him. He looked anxiously up at it for signs of cracking or crumbling. He told himself that was absurd. The damn tunnel had withstood centuries. It looked strong enough now; limestone and crude mortar, rugged but regular. He adjusted his helmet a little further over his face so that his helmet-lamp illuminated directly ahead.

Collier's feet had stopped moving. It would be possible, Bentinck thought, to shift his feet so that he was squatting. Perhaps there would be some relief in that. He tried it, but after a few moments he realised the strain on his thigh and calf muscles would become a problem. "Keep looking to the front," he told himself. "Don't look up. Tell yourself you *want* to kneel, not stand. If nothing helps, back out, fast. Or slow. Or whatever you want. Nobody's keeping you down here."

Collier moved on again. He half-turned, his lamp moving brightly on the wall to his left. "I think you're kneeling on the line," he said, his voice a catarrhal echo.

Bentinck tilted his head down. He was. The measured twenty-five-foot line Wilkie was pulling forward was now imprisoned by Bentinck's right leg.

"Sorry," Bentinck said. "Try it now." The freed line slithered forward. Bentinck felt slightly better for hearing Collier's voice.

They scrabbled forward again. The floor of the tunnel was thick with slime and debris. Here and there the sea-water was trapped in tiny pools. Bentinck's legs were already sodden and cold. More than anything he wanted to be up and out in the sunlight.

It occurred to him now that if the tide had been sweeping away the fill covering the beach inlets they could all three drown before they could regain the shaft. One of them ought to have stayed on the shaft bottom.

Bentinck stopped suddenly, his breathing ragged and tears of fright running down his cheeks. He couldn't move. Sheer terror seized his mind and body.

There was a scrabbling sound in front. Collier's light turned back towards him. "You all right?"

A pause. Somewhere, Bentinck found the nerve to paddle convincingly ahead with his hands, though his knees remained rooted. "Sure. Why not?" he gasped.

"Great. We're there." Collier's voice funnelled away in the opposite direction. "Move forward a few feet, Wilk. I want to traverse this whole section. The drill could have hit anywhere in that vault—anywhere over a thirty-foot spread, maybe."

A damp scuffling sound reached back towards Bentinck. He slumped down gratefully, his back along the west wall. Mud and water moulded his coveralls to his thigh and rump. He still did not dare to look up, but the change of position was calming. He closed his eyes against the glare of Collier's and Wilkie's lamps. With an effort he summoned up the images of his mother and sister. Thinking about them helped, so he tried to recall Somerford in the spring: the hedgerows; the Friesians browsing close to the lanes, curious about passers-by; the giant yews of the house itself; old Denning, who came every year with his ladders to re-shape them. Gradually, with the effort of summoning the elusive scent of hawthorn blossom, the magic of the wild flowers and the sounds of the seasons, he anaesthetised his fears. He opened his eyes. Ahead of him Collier shouted forward and back. Wilkie's muffled curses sounded as if he were talking through a wet cloth.

The chill began to creep up from Bentinck's legs and settle into the rest of his body. He shivered. The misery of his panic was gone for the moment. Each minute that passed without disaster from ahead or above reassured him.

His helmet-lamp splashed light across the east wall. Solid, reassuring stone, the white, rather flaky mortar solidly in place. Good. That was good. He allowed himself a rueful grin. He wasn't much use down here, but he was pleased with himself for having tried.

Collier called to Wilkie. Wilkie grunted replies. Measurements.

Bentinck stared at the wall, grateful for the light, and tried not to twist his head to the left to look back at the shaft. It was no further away, in fact, than across the floor of a medium-sized room, but he wasn't free yet to scramble towards it for relief.

He examined his section of wall. Perhaps six feet of it.

He had been looking at it for some time before he really focussed. Limestone rock. Broken, random shapes, different sizes, used as in any other wall, the way they and the mortar built—to the required height. Except . . .

Except that one piece had shape.

Almost directly opposite him was one piece which wasn't quite like the rest. Rough surfaced, yes, but perfectly shaped. A hexagon. The more he stared the greater the oddity it appeared. It took him some time to realise its significance. He held his breath. No doubt of it. A neat, near-perfect hexagon.

A warmth flooded through him. He forgot the wet and cold. He tried to speak, but the words simply rattled in his throat. He cleared it and tried again.

"Alan!"

After a moment Collier's lamp swung towards him.

"Okay," Bentinck said, exaggerating his normal drawl. "I'm wet and cramped and the air's filthy. I know you're both having fun, but I think you should both come back here and break through this wall."

Collier's lamp bobbed swiftly towards him.

"Neat hexagonal marker," Bentinck gestured. "Now, if you don't mind, having done the difficult part I'll move out to make room for the brute force."

29

Exuberant in his relief at not being confined in the tunnel, Bentinck insisted on remaining at shaft bottom while Wilkie and Collier tackled the hexagonal marker. He sat quite happily in the mud at the tunnel mouth, alternately peering into its gloom and up at the ice-blue ellipse of sky far above him.

He could hear the slow echoing beat of steel on rock as Wilkie, disdaining a hand drill, chipped away at the left-hand wall. When there was a long silence he poked his head anxiously into the tunnel. "What's happening?" he shouted.

A scuffling sound, then the soles of Collier's boots came backing slowly down towards him. Unable to turn round, Collier explained in muffled tones, "Slow work. He's got to tackle it on his side, reaching up. No way he can kneel up to it and still see what he's doing. Why don't you go up and get yourself dry and grab a cup of coffee?"

"I'm okay here."

Collier grunted and crawled ahead again.

It was cold at shaft bottom, but Bentinck didn't care. He could stand upright whenever he wanted, and that was enough. He took his helmet off, rubbed his forehead where the head-harness chafed, and sat back, waiting. The slow beat of Wilkie's assault resumed.

What day of the week was it? He didn't know. Weekdays and weekends had long since ceased to be significant since the crews had worked the same shifts every day. He wondered if this was a Saturday. On a Saturday in New York he would have rung Wendy. He thought about her now. If this really worked, this vault thing, he would soon be free. But how did that help? He still had two years to wait for her. By then her youngest, Pam, would be old enough for boarding school;

Dinah, the eldest girl, would be fourteen. Then and only then would she leave her feckless husband, Ralph, and join Bentinck wherever, and whatever he was. That was the arrangement which had already endured four years; years of waiting, of rare and fleeting hours together in motels, hotels, railway stations and cabs; little enough, but sufficient always to remind themselves that in each other they had what they needed for a better life.

Occasionally Bentinck wondered, feeling guilty at his lack of faith, whether the continuing separation itself was what powered such a hopeless, lonely devotion. At other times he knew with fierce certainty that no woman he had ever known had come even close to matching Wendy. She was perfect: cool, quiet and beautiful; intelligent and perceptive, but without a cutting edge; feminine but not contrary; passionate and sentimental, but not cloyingly so. She was worth the waiting for; his own kind, and worth both the exile and the deception he was forced, meanwhile, to practise on his mother and sister, who would not approve.

His job in New York had been to a single end: enough money to pay for a new start with Wendy in some place new to them both.

Being alone in New York had been difficult. From Monday to Friday he was held to Bowman's killing schedule. The general insisted on starting work at eight-thirty and he rarely stopped before six, so that when Bentinck wasn't involved with dinners and receptions, or in travelling as Bowman's ambassador, or in attendance at Old Burlington, he was often glad to fall into bed alone. But he had dreaded the weekends.

There had been just that one highspot every Saturday morning. At seven a.m. New York time he would dial direct and if he was lucky neither Ralph nor the girls would be at home in faraway Guildford at midday on a Saturday morning. He would dial and wait, hearing the phone ring in her house, picture Wendy hurrying to answer. Then for a few minutes they would charge their emotional batteries with soft words and expensive emotional silences, like lovelorn teenagers.

After those sessions there had been nothing left. He would shop to restock his refrigerator, take care of the small errands of bachelor living. But sooner or later he was alone and with time to fill. Sunday had always been the worst. After he had eaten his ritual English breakfast, tidied the apartment and read the newspapers, he was faced with a day of yawning television.

Well, all that was changed. If he was to part with Bowman there would have to be another job, with luck one which didn't always leave him feeling like a sprinter, over-tense on the mark, waiting for the crack of Monday morning to be free of his own company.

The noise of Wilkie's hammering stopped. There was a muttered exchange with Collier, killed for Bentinck by the echo. A pause. Then the tumbling sound of rock being moved. Bentinck crawled in about a yard, his feet still in the shaft. It sounded as if Wilkie had breached the wall.

"Anything?" he yelled.

The sound of hammering resumed, but only for a few moments. The sound of rock falling. More hammering, more rock falls.

In a quiet moment, Bentinck yelled again, "Through?"

Collier's reply was unintelligible. Impatiently, Bentinck crawled forward. This time the claustrophobia was less. It was still there, but controllable. No one was watching him; no one would be any the wiser if he backed out again fast, so he inched on steadily. He had forgotten his helmet and had to make do without a light. With Collier's body blocking the tunnel, only a dim halo of light was visible ahead and he overran Collier's legs before he could form a picture of who was doing what.

"Come to see," he said amiably, addressing Collier's behind. "Sounds like success."

"We're through the wall. Chamber of some kind. A void, anyway. Wilk's pushing the rock farther up ahead, clearing the area."

If he leaned his head on the left-hand wall, Bentinck could see something. Wilkie was stretched out full length, cold chiselling at the mortar until he could break out a piece of

rock. When he had it he passed it up his body, dug in his legs and heaved it into the blackness beyond. He did that now and relaxed a moment. He pushed himself up on one elbow.

"It goes up!" Wilkie said mysteriously.

Collier grunted.

Wilkie weaved his head about, trying to get his light into the opening. Bentinck flattened himself out. It was no more comfortable, but it gave him the illusion that there was plenty of space above his head. He thought he heard Wilkie say, "Goes up. Sand. Dry sand." And then, "Have to clear some stuff."

"Right," Collier said.

Wilkie seemed to abandon the hole. In a moment, as Collier moved forward into the space Wilkie had vacated, Bentinck understood that Wilkie was clearing more room ahead for further debris. Collier now jammed himself half upright, his hard-hat grinding into the roof, his right knee drawn up to provide some sort of balance. He picked up the tools and began hammering. In the confined space the noise was appalling.

At the base of the wall the hole was already something more than two feet wide. Collier was now working upwards, breaking off the jagged sides of the opening and broadening it to something like the same width.

There was nothing to do but wait. Bentinck rolled on to his back, found himself staring at the roof and hastily changed position. He put his head down on one crooked arm and tried hard to think about Wendy again. But it was difficult. He thought about hot coffee and food. Improbably, he began to feel drowsy.

Collier's foot caught him on the top of the head.

"Sorry, moving back," Bentinck said. As he backed off he glanced at the hole. It was more or less uniformly two feet wide and almost as tall.

"Few minutes more," Collier said.

They took up their old positions. Wilkie slithered back and attacked the upper wall in the way that Collier had—wedged between roof and floor. He hammered furiously for a

while, then flung down the tools. Bentinck squinted along the tunnel. The hole was already quite big enough to crawl through. Not much smaller, in fact, than the tunnel mouth itself.

". . . do it," he thought he heard Wilkie say. "Get through. No vault. More like passage."

"Watch yourself," Collier warned.

Wilkie came back a little, angled left and thrust himself gingerly through the hole. He paused immobile so long with his head and shoulders through the gap, his trunk and legs in the tunnel, that Bentinck began to worry that something had happened to him on the other side of the wall. He shivered, his imagination tormenting him with some kind of final guardian of the vault which had in some way paralysed Wilkie.

Collier evidently had no such anxiety. Leaning on Wilkie's legs, he too was staring into the gap, directing his light the same way.

"Chisel," Wilkie grunted, holding his hand back like a surgeon.

Collier slapped it into his palm.

In the chill silence, Bentinck thought he heard a scrunching sound, as if Wilkie were plunging the chisel again and again into shale.

"Okay," Wilkie decided.

His body began to move forwards into the gap. When his feet disappeared, Collier angled to follow him. In another few moments Bentinck was alone in the main tunnel.

He knew from the muffled, echoing sound of their voices that they were alive and well, but it was small comfort. What if anything fearful happened to them in that—chamber, vault, whatever it was? At any moment he expected shouts of alarm. Some new trap. Flood water. Rock falls. Some kind of self-sealing device; he'd seen something like that in a film about Egyptian tombs. He realised that he was again in a blue funk. Despite the cold he was sweating so fiercely that his eyebrows were soaked. He was ashamed. He clenched his teeth and resolved not to retreat down to the shaft. If he could just hold on . . .

He estimated five minutes, counted seconds. Wilkie and Collier were still moving about in the vault, or whatever. He could hear them talking, tapping. But they showed no signs of returning.

"Christsake," he yelled at last. "What's happening?"

The muttering stopped. There was some movement at the wall. Collier's helmet-lamp appeared and turned towards him.

"How the hell did you manage that?" Bentinck said, forcing calm into his voice.

"What?"

"Turn round."

"Plenty of room in there." The lamp bobbed towards him. "Back off. We're coming out now."

It was the most beautiful thing Bentinck could remember having been said to him. He moved backwards on all fours faster than he would have thought possible. He knew when his legs were in the shaft by the difference in the draught. He wriggled all the way out and stood up, shakily. He picked up his helmet and put it on at a jaunty angle.

"Thought you'd started a card school in there," he complained cheerfully as Wilkie and Collier joined him. "Anyway, what's to see?"

Collier yanked the line to the bell on the surface. Ritson's head appeared and yelled something. They climbed aboard the grab bucket.

The bucket whined upward rapidly.

"A passage, I guess you'd call it," Collier said. "Sandy floor. Wall on the left much like the tunnel wall. But on the right-hand wall something else again."

"Smooth blocks, a foot square, soft mortar," Wilkie said wearily. "Got to be the vault."

"Really?" Bentinck looked to Collier for confirmation.

Collier nodded, smiling broadly. "If there's a vault on Dirk's we've found it. Whether or not it holds anything, that's to see when we get Bowman in."

"What was all that about going up?" Bentinck wanted to know.

"Floor goes up," Wilkie explained. "Quite a slope."

Collier said thoughtfully, "What we don't know is why. Maybe to deliver the right people to just that section of the vault wall which is ready-prepared for easy break-in. Or maybe not. Perhaps it's to clear the likely rise of water in the tunnel should the wall give way while the tunnel is filled with water and the trap set. A precaution against erosion of the tunnel wall in that spot; if the water got through it wouldn't be likely to rise to fill the passage—you can tell from the tunnel roof that when the trap is set the flood water finds its own level, and isn't filling the tunnel right up to the top. Doesn't need to."

Bentinck hadn't noticed. He could visualise the new passage, though, sloping steeply upwards. And the notion that it delivered you to a particular segment of the wall of the vault which was most vulnerable—that, too, seemed sense.

"What next?"

"Call Bowman," Collier said. "For the breakthrough."

30

It was the first time they had met and talked since New York. The setting this time—the beach, the launch in the background—could hardly have been more different.

Wilkie and the man who was Santander walked slowly side by side, silent as they watched Bowman and the others who had met him on the beach move on ahead. They were all making for the mess hall.

The man waited until the others were almost out of sight over the dunes before he spoke. "After our unfortunate series of disasters, I think there needs to be one more," he said evenly. "A big one, I would say."

Wilkie paused for a moment, turned sideways to see if the man's face was as expressionless as his voice, saw that it was,

and resumed walking again almost immediately—he was nervous enough about talking with the man in full view even if no one could suspect what was really happening.

"I hope you know what the hell you're doing," he said at last, sidestepping what the other had said.

The other began speaking to him as though to a wayward child. "If there is gold in that vault at all," he said, "then it exists in such volume that it will turn your hair white. I should think that should be spur enough. Nothing you could possibly want will be beyond your dreams."

Wilkie began to interrupt, but the voice continued, quietly but firmly, a man giving a lecture. "You've already shown the commendable initiative I anticipated when I first approached you. Terrill was a nice touch, so was throwing his body down the shaft. I take it you killed him somewhere else?"

Wilkie had. He had hunted him down in the darkness, in the hours before the search was to be resumed, caved in his skull, carried him to the site.

He said nothing though; nor did the other expect an answer and the voice continued evenly, "The fact that more remains to be done may be beyond what you expected—but then so, I think, will be the reward." The voice had become silky, almost purring. "Not nice, I know. But hardly the end of the world—for you at least. After all, what more logical than that after a series of disasters there should be one more."

Wilkie watched the others filing into the mess hall. Even though to anyone looking back it would simply be two men walking more slowly than the others, he was uncomfortable. He let his mind turn to the money, giving himself an injection of courage from what it would mean to him. The good life, the travel, the women. The freedom. He grinned suddenly. Today or tomorrow it would be all over.

"I'm nervous about your end of it," he blustered finally.

The man began to laugh. "That's the least of your worries. It will be well managed. That's all you need to know."

They were almost into the street of cabins. Suddenly the man stopped. His voice remained low, but became harder.

"If you are thinking everything is being left to you, don't forget I am left with Bowman himself. You understand what that means?"

The voice cut through Wilkie's fears; the glimpse of a hard man, a man in control, brought reassurance.

"I understand."

The man reached out, touched his elbow, urged him forward, and the two men, Wilkie and Borden Hillier, entered the mess hall together.

31

Dressed in smart coveralls, Bowman had negotiated the tunnel with astonishing agility. He sat now against the blind end of the short sloping passageway, studying the smooth wall of the vault for himself. "A hand drill ought to free two or three of these blocks. How long will that take?"

His helmet-lamp dazzled Collier, crouching at the top of the slope with Wilkie behind him.

"Minutes," Collier ventured. "Two of us ought to be able to push them in."

Bowman hesitated. "I suppose we'll have to risk any damage they may do."

Collier waited.

"All right," Bowman said finally. And in ringing tones, "Break in."

Collier smiled. Behind him he heard Wilkie snort, stifling his impatience. He twisted his body round, surprised to see Bentinck, too, in the gleam of his helmet-lamp. "Everybody back off," he said. "The General wants out."

It took an hour. Using a hand drill, Wilkie first took out the soft mortar from beneath two blocks about one-third along the wall and dead centre between roof and floor. From

the effort he judged the blocks to be at least a foot deep. When he had the bottom line clear he inserted wooden splints and hammered them home. Mortar began to break out of the other joints.

When he was through, Collier joined him, backs to the opposite wall, feet braced against the blocks. They took deep breaths. "Now!" The blocks moved easily. "Again!" This time both blocks rattled to the back of the aperture that was opening and hung there, held only by the leading edges. Panting, Wilkie turned on his left side, edged nearer and planted his boot firmly across both. He yelled, pushed—and the blocks fell in.

They seemed to fall a long way.

"Nice work," Collier said. "For that you get first look."

He was grinning hugely. This was it then. In a moment or two they would know. Either there was something down there—or fifty men, one general, two girls, a lot of machinery and a bankful of money had all been expended on the efforts of some seventeenth-century practical joker.

"Go on," he said. Wilkie's toothy grin looked uncertain. But he shuffled himself round to get his legs behind him. At the hole he seemed to hesitate again. He took off his hard-hat, held it into the hole and poked his head cautiously alongside his arm into the blackness.

Collier watched as the back of Wilkie's head moved from side to side and the helmet-lamp swept the vault.

Unable to bear the suspense, Collier yelled, "Godsake! Say something. We hit the jackpot or not?"

Wilkie said nothing. At length he withdrew his head. His light wobbled at Collier meaninglessly. But it looked more like 'No' than 'Yes'. Collier sagged back, dumbfounded. Disappointment numbed his mind. Suddenly, perversely, he admitted that he cared very much.

Wilkie grunted. He was waving Collier to the hole, urgently. At once Collier understood that the headshake wasn't a 'No' at all, but an inability to find adequate words. He scrabbled forwards on his knees.

The blackness was awesome, absolute. His light hardly cut it. He tilted his head down—and almost stopped breathing.

Below him, and perhaps twenty feet across the floor of the vault, his puny light picked out a stone-built pen. He shivered incredulously. He held perfectly still, hardly able to trust his eyes.

The stone pen seemed to be full of dull gold. He thought he could distinguish gold chain; gold curved surfaces, like plate or the circular bases of ornaments; gold stems, rising at erratic intervals like the masts of shipwrecks on a sea of gold; gold fashioned in the flat, in bulbous, circular and rectilinear shapes. Gold artefacts jumbled together, uncovered, lying in a mass, puzzling in shape and form. But that they were gold he had no doubt.

He moved his head slightly. Another stone pen. And another. Not unlike a series of pig-pens. Each filled with the same kinds of items. Then an aisle. Or more than one? The light wasn't good enough.

Collier heard Bowman call from the mouth of the main tunnel. He ignored him. He remained on his knees, staring. A flashlight would be no use yet. There was too little room for both head and arm in the aperture. From side to side the limited range of his head movement traversed his helmet-lamp across an area of twenty feet—and he could see no wall to left or right. And from the aperture, to the furthest point his light would reach dully, he judged to be about thirty feet.

In that size area, if the whole floor were covered with pens of this kind, each filled with gold . . . Collier withdrew his head, bemused and shaken. The enormous hoard was unbelievable. Speech-defying.

"Well?" Bowman barked again.

Collier shook his head, just as Wilkie had done. "Jackpot!" he croaked, his voice rattling away down the tunnels.

32

Wilkie and Collier moved back to the blind end of the sloped passageway and sat down with their backs to it to make room for Bowman. The General came in, crawling efficiently and without apparent effort or concern. It was odd, Collier thought, that even on hands and knees the man demonstrated something like dignity.

Without a word, Bowman thrust his head into the hole. For perhaps three minutes he turned his body this way and that, trying to illumine the farthest limits of his unreachable treasure.

He withdrew and turned to Collier with a bemused expression. He seemed about to order a strong flashlight and a larger aperture, but gave no order. Collier understood. Bowman longed to see more and see it clearly, but couldn't yet bear the idea that such a stupendous find should be further exposed without thought and planning.

"Up!" Bowman decided. "Everybody up!" And urgently backed away down the slope. Bentinck, waiting his turn in some agitation, retreated with mixed feelings.

Collier was last to step out of the grab and on to the platform. Bowman stood toe to toe with him and clapped him on the shoulder, beaming. He looked warmly at Collier. "You did it. Now you see I was right to insist on getting you here. It was worth it. This is a tremendous achievement." He turned and held out his hands to them, like a high-priest. "You've all been superb. This is a great moment for me."

He basted them with his warmth a few moments longer and then switched to a sombre expression. "Nothing must be touched," he declared. "Absolutely nothing. Everything has to be photographed, described and recorded, both *in situ* and

separately as it's brought to the surface. From this moment onwards we move at a different, a scientific pace."

In spite of this speech, it was evident that Bowman had been greatly moved by the vault and its contents. He suffered himself to be led into the mess hall. He even accepted a plate of goulash from Brooks, seeming not to notice that he had stood in line for it behind Wilkie.

He sat down and folded his arms across his chest, ignoring his plate. His eyes had a faraway look of triumph. "I believe," he said comfortably, "that the only reason Bowman-Brace was given a lease was that the Canadians never believed this site would produce anything. They thought it was hopeless, like Oak. No one, not even Hillier, believed I could achieve what I've done here."

Hillier, who had not been allowed even to glimpse the vault in Bowman's hurry to reach the surface, was silent. He smiled, simply accepting reports of the immensity of the find.

"*Who* did *what* where?" Collier asked innocently.

If Bowman heard he gave no sign. "I will bring a team of archaeologists in here fast," he told anyone listening. "They can use the camp. None of you"—he remembered to smile at them again—"will have need of it any longer. The security men will have to be brought back, too. And the cooks and maintenance men. Jake—you'll take control of that for me until the end of the affair? You'll find me very generous."

"Right, General," Ritson said, startled by Bowman's knowledge of, much less use of, his first name.

"You're finished with us?" Bentinck asked eagerly.

"All but," Bowman nodded.

He picked up a fork tentatively, looked down at his plate and pushed it away. Food was irrelevant. "I will have you all transferred to a hotel in Halifax for the moment. After all, there may be some small technical problems to overcome yet. I ask you to remain on call there until the news breaks. And, of course, you will closely adhere to that clause in your contracts relating to giving information or interviews to the press. That is understood?"

They all nodded, looking at Collier, who shrugged. "Sure. No one wants to steal your thunder, General."

"It is not a matter of personal publicity," Bowman said haughtily. "In a few days Dirk's Island will be world headlines. Every detail of the expedition will come under close scrutiny." For the moment a shadow flitted across his face as he realised what adverse aspects might receive unwelcome publicity.

Exuberance restored, he slapped the table with the flat of his hand. "This is sensational! If the whole thing isn't carefully handled by press relations experts it could get out of hand. Television, reporters, photographers, historians, art experts, writers, cranks, agents, private collectors, dealers—there has to be an organisation to winnow the genuine from those who will simply get in the way."

He shook his head wistfully. "If only I had had more time. Archaeologists from all over the world would have fought each other for places in the team which will lift the material from the vault, see it and handle it for the first time. Think of it—handling Aztec gold in such breathtaking volume . . ."

"I suppose it is gold?" Wilkie said suddenly. "Not bronze?"

Bowman turned on him a look of withering contempt. "Have you any idea what a vault full of Aztec bronze would be worth?" He exhaled impatiently. "However, the Aztecs worked in gold, not bronze."

"When did we decide it was Aztec?" Bentinck wanted to know.

The smile Bowman turned on Bentinck merely made allowance for his youth and naïvety. "You still don't see, do you? It is possible to get lost in scholarship. If I had gone by the experts, I'd never have started work on Dirk's. Did Schliemann take any notice of experts who told him there was no such place as Troy? This is precisely why I didn't allow archaeologists here first. I didn't want the timbers analysed, the fibre carbon-dated. I wanted no nails or rusted knives. Just the gold."

Into his stride now, Bowman lectured, "Aztec, Mayan or Inca, what does it matter? Here is a golden hoard buried for hundreds of years. Leaving aside for the moment that it had

to have origin with one of these three civilisations—there simply weren't any other sources of such material on the entire American continent—the intrinsic value of the material, and its value to the world's combined art collections, state or private, remains precisely the same. One is interested, of course, to know which it belongs to. But it simply doesn't *matter*. Any more than it matters how the material came to be where it is. Of what use are theories?" Bowman's voice had risen now, and in his mind's eye he had a wider audience. "It is Aztec gold, secreted here by some Spanish faction, perhaps, who could not bear to surrender it to the King of Spain. Or it is Inca gold, hidden by some conquistador tempted by a vision of riches and power which would make him proof even against his own sovereign. Or the Aztecs, tired of relentless pillage, used Dirk's and Oak, too, as a place of safety for some part of the wealth and splendour of their temples—against the time when the Spanish would withdraw. One thing is sure, we shall never know. Historians and theorists will argue about it for decades. And none of it matters. It is there, down there in the ground, and now it is mine."

"Yours?" Collier had listened phlegmatically, more concerned for the moment with his lunch. Startled now, he lit a cigarette and contemplated Bowman's flushed excitement with some amusement.

"And the Canadian Government's," Bowman grudged. Anxious not to pursue the point, he added drily, "The whole thing will doubtless be raised at the United Nations, for that matter."

Collier exchanged glances with Bentinck and Brooks. He opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it. What Bowman did with his golden prize was of no concern to him.

"The only problem," Bowman continued, "is that we have only a few days left to run in our lease. However, I have no doubt that with this tremendous result we shall be able to block the subsequent exploration licence. The Canadian authorities will never allow that to come into force now."

Bowman seemed to remember that, having found the

vault, his problems had just begun. He stood up, his impatience to be away nibbling at his final scene. He said gravely, "You have all done great work. And I am grateful. Full bonuses will be made to you all, including the men of the original crews—though they don't really deserve it after their recent behaviour." He tucked his chin in tightly, studying them almost affectionately. "I'd like you to stay on, Wilkie, to, uh, supervise the technical side of the recovery. You may let me have your decision this evening, when I see you all at a celebration dinner aboard the *Mulberry Hill*. I have already given instructions. The launch will fetch you all at seven. Jake, you have agreed to supervise the services side of things? Fine. As to the rest of you, I'll have you lifted to Halifax in a day or two, if that will suit?"

He caught Hillier's eye and hurried out, making for the launch. Still silent and impassive, with only a wintry smile of goodbye to be shared among them all, Hillier followed at his own pace.

33

In the freighter's plush dining room two of Bowman's stewards tended half a dozen bottles of Krug on ice and withdrew. Bowman, urbane and confident, wearing one of his pale grey paramilitary suits, waited until the door had closed behind them before formally raising a champagne tulip. "To the Dirk's Island affair and its successful conclusion—for all of us," he said ringingly.

"I would ask," he added, over a rumble of responses, "that you avoid any reference to our find so long as you're aboard." His tone was paternal and confidential. "For the moment no one outside this room knows anything at all, and I want to keep it that way. Now—let us enjoy ourselves."

For the moment, the tenor of their last meeting in this room was forgotten as they drank the champagne and talked tentatively as if they had forgotten how it was done in circumstances like these.

"You staying?" Collier asked Wilkie.

"I guess."

"Make the bastard pay then," Collier growled. "God-sake, it isn't a few ancient pots and coins. It's a boatload of gold—probably enough to get South America out of the red."

Maureen, at Wilkie's elbow, said tartly, "Wilk's been around . . ."

Collier at once turned away, looking for Brooks. He found her at the huge port window staring out, side by side with Bentinck, at the darkening sky. A mood of mellow anticipation claimed him. He was, at last, through with the old life. Now he had Brooks and in a week or two he could start to make a new life happen. It had begun to slot into place. At such a moment it was even hard to dislike Bowman.

The General's ban on talk about Dirk's proved superfluous. With a return to soft beds and civilisation at least in sight, Bowman's gold seemed irrelevant. And though they had all approached the celebration dinner with misgiving, it no longer seemed such a bad idea.

The real surprise of the evening was Bowman himself. He fussed over them genially from the head of the table as solicitously as if they were a distinguished gathering basking in the candle-lit, flag-draped glory of the dining room at Old Burlington. He told stories wittily, enjoying his role and sharing their laughter.

The silent stewards produced a first course choice of fresh salmon, ceviche, *champignons à la grecque* or a chilled fish in sour cream. Bowman seemed delighted when Wilkie sampled not one but three of them. And when Maureen, torn between curiosity and the desire to create an impression of familiarity with European haute cuisine, pestered him for details, he patiently and precisely explained the preparation of each dish.

Collier watched this performance astonished, squeezing

Brooks's hand under the table to focus her attention. She smiled serenely.

Bentinck announced that he wouldn't be returning to New York and didn't like the place. Collier, supported by Brooks, defended the city fiercely, while Jake Ritson, hungry, humorous and articulate, was neutral on New York but launched into praise of Los Angeles. Only Wilkie seemed withdrawn but patchily cheerful.

Bowman's bonhomie remained unflawed through the tournedos Rossini, and when the stewards had retreated a third time, after leaving syllabubs, mousses, custards and ices, it seemed perfectly natural, even to Collier, that he should call upon "Brooks, my dear" to assist with the coffee.

When it was over they stood on deck for a while. There was a strong breeze, but the night was good after the food and the warmth of the dining room. The dark sea rolled the freighter in a slow and heavy swell, but no one seemed to mind.

"I don't believe this," Bentinck told Ritson. "It can't be happening."

"Stop worrying, sport," Ritson advised. "In three or four days you'll be absolved, most likely. In a month you'll be laughing into your beer in some Gloucestershire pub and counting your dollars."

Hillier lit a cigar and strolled purposefully towards the stern in an exercising way. After a moment or two of indecision, Wilkie followed.

"So now we *do* know," Hillier's voice said softly from the shadows. "The old fool has really stumbled on to millions. And within the year you'll be a millionaire. How does that feel? Where will you go—Vegas?"

Startled, Wilkie wondered if that had been a lucky guess. Was he that transparent? "Skip the commercial," he said irritably. "I can do my own fantasising."

Hillier's cigar winked in the unlit gloom of the superstructure overhang. "I think you have two days at most," he warned. "After that, your workings will be crawling with so-called scientists . . ."

Wilkie knew it. And he found the knowledge sobering. He

had just eaten, Judas-fashion, with the only five people in the world who knew what lay under Dirk's Island and must never be allowed to carry the secret away with them. If they left Dirk's alive his one chance in a lifetime of becoming a rich man would disappear.

The weight of such knowledge frightened and oppressed him. He didn't want to talk about it now, especially not here, with those same people only yards away. He knew what had to be done, even if he had no idea, yet, how it could be achieved. One thing he certainly didn't need was Hillier on his back, shoving. Everything was at stake. Everything. His one chance at cutting loose. "Get off my goddam back," he thought, but he allowed Hillier to light his cigarette for him.

More cheerfully than he felt, he said, "I was tired, anyway, of being the reliable, cuddly Ernest Borgnine type."

34

"No thanks," Brooks said over breakfast. "You all go, though. I'll work the crane if you'll show me how. Small closets, showers and even some hotel bathrooms get me spooked. I'll wait until it's on display at the Museum of Folk Art or somewhere."

"Maureen?"

"Certainly I want to go," Maureen wailed. "I thought we all ought to have the chance. Old Bowman had his nerve—"

"Nick?" Collier cut in.

Bentinck hesitated only for a moment. "Yes, of course. Silly to have come this far and not to see what we've all worked for all this time." He turned to Brooks, amused.

"What makes you think much of it will ever be in a museum? Stuff like that will go to people with the money—private collectors."

Puzzled, Brooks protested, "But it's a national treasure, surely? I mean, some will stay in Canada, of course. But the rest will go where people can see it, enjoy it." Bewildered by Bentinck's smile, she added uncertainly, "Is that silly?"

"No, not silly," Bentinck dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. "Just a bit idealistic. These days governments don't spend much on art treasures. Bowman will sell where he gets the best offers—private collectors."

Collier was startled, too. "But it isn't Bowman's to sell. Well, not much of it." He frowned. "Just how much *will* he keep?"

Untroubled, Bentinck reached for the coffee pot. "How much did you think?"

"A small percentage?"

"Afraid not." Bentinck filled his cup. "His lease for exploration of Dirk's allows the Canadian Government something like ten per cent of anything and everything he finds. The rest is his to do what he likes with." Looking up at Collier's frozen astonishment, he added, "You hadn't realised that?"

"I'm speechless," Collier said.

"Me, too," Brooks said.

"It's about the same sort of deal the excavators on Oak have always been allowed," said Bentinck. "Perhaps the General was right. No one ever thought he'd find anything. Or maybe they thought that if he did dig up something it would be coin or ingot. Anyway, that's the way the agreement reads. The Canadians are stuck with it. Nothing in it says that there should be a different split if the stuff has art value over and above the intrinsic."

"You've *always* known this?" Collier demanded.

"Of course. I drafted the agreement myself."

"Godsake! The man's a vandal, a Goth."

"Oh come," Bentinck protested. "You're forgetting, no one, including all of us here, ever believed there was anything down there. Bowman did. If he hadn't mounted this operation

the stuff would have stayed down there for ever. As it is, the art world will have this much satisfaction: everything in that vault will be described, evaluated, measured and photographed five different ways. So posterity benefits sideways, for a start. Anyway, some of it will come into museums in time. Collectors die, leave stuff to kids who want to convert it into spending money. Bowman's doing the world a favour."

Listening, Wilkie felt he ought to say something one way or the other. In the end he settled for, "Some benefactor! He scoops millions, offers us a few grand." He was disturbed by what had begun to look like a perfect opportunity. His gut churned ceaselessly with the sudden need for action. And Maureen? What about her? If she went down it made no sense that she should ever come up again. And yet . . . she wasn't a bad kid. Not exactly a leggy, Vegas showgirl. But she seemed to like him. And the other night he had nearly got to her. So nearly, in fact, that she'd had him thinking about her almost every moment he wasn't thinking about Hillier, unlimited money, Vegas, and how to make it. Perhaps it was her size that appealed. Or the fact that she quite obviously didn't know her stuff; that certainly had a kind of crazy attraction. She was like a kid, really. Trusting, frightened . . . Jeezus! This was no good. There were other problems. What the hell was the solution to the Remsen girl? If she stayed up top and all the rest went down . . .

"So it's your last chance, Brooks," Bentinck was saying. "Sure you won't come down? You can't be more scared than I am."

Brooks smiled doubtfully. "We'll see. I'll come out with you anyway."

"Give me five minutes," Wilkie said, "and I'll drive you all out there."

He got up and hurried across to his cabin. He sat down on the bed, his head in his hands, trying to think clearly. Yes or no? He was not worried by any kind of morality. Only about whether it would work. In his mind's eye he lined the five of them up at the edge of the shaft. He went over it one more time. Once they had crawled into the tunnel . . .

Twenty-five minutes later, Wilkie tucked the big Dodge into its customary place on the north side of the platform.

"I'll take the lead," Collier said. "We'd better be sure it's still dry, there are no falls, that kind of stuff. You follow me, Nick. Then you, Jake. Then Brooks, then Maureen. When we're down there, I'll go up into the passageway. When you've looked—each of you—you back out and go a little farther up the tunnel. If each one does that, we'll have plenty of room. Okay?"

Bentinck very much wanted to opt out. Picturing Collier's arrangement in his mind's eye, he saw that as each of them came out of the passageway and crawled on to allow the next one inside, he would be pushed farther and farther up the tunnel beyond the passageway. He saw Collier's eye on him. "Right!" he said enthusiastically and knew his last chance was gone.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind handling the crane, Wilk?"

"Check," Wilkie said. He didn't trust his voice.

"Brooks?"

Brooks grinned nervously. "Okay, I'll do it."

"That's my girl. Wilk—the bucket."

Wilkie climbed up, started the crane, lifted the bucket from the west side of the platform and brought it close. Collier and Bentinck got in. It lifted and carried them down out of sight.

The two women waited nervously on the platform with Ritson. "Nothing to it," he assured them. "Take it slow, don't panic. If you get jumpy, close your eyes and breathe deeply."

The bucket reappeared. "Come on," Ritson said. "Room for all three." They rode the bucket, Ritson the hook and cable.

Maureen giggled self-consciously, like a girl about to undertake a harrowing fairground ride. Brooks was pale and tight-lipped as the bucket dropped smoothly, swiftly to the shaft bottom, the shoring rising up around her sickeningly.

Flattened against the wall, Collier and Bentinck stepped forward to help them out. "Getting crowded down here," Bentinck muttered. He rang the bell and the bucket rose. He

looked at Brooks. She was wearing the trapped look that he imagined he had himself.

"Okay," Collier said. "Give me a short lead so I can check it out as I go." He pulled on his hard-hat, bent and entered the tunnel head first.

Bentinck counted twenty seconds, stooped, couldn't see Collier's feet and crawled in behind him. After a moment, Ritson followed.

"I'm scared," Brooks confessed to Maureen. "I couldn't go last, could I? That way if I got panicky I could back out any time."

"Sure," Maureen smiled in a superior way. "Here we go."

Brooks dropped to one knee and watched her shuffle forwards. When she could no longer see the soles of Maureen's rubber boots she bent and crawled in cautiously.

At once she halted, seized by irrational fear. She was hardly in the tunnel at all. Her feet were still in the shaft. And yet . . . She wished that Wilkie had left the grab in the down position. What, she thought wildly, if Wilkie had a heart attack now?

With four lamps ahead of her, some of the blackness was relieved. Perhaps she could cope. She moved on cautiously. Maureen's behind, absurdly baggy in the smallest coveralls she had found, was stationary ahead. The leaders had evidently halted at the break in the tunnel wall. She heard Collier's voice from up there, distorted yet amplified.

Further along, Bentinck sweated silently. Like a patient enduring the dentist's drill, he reasoned that the longer he endured his distress without showing it, the closer he must be to release. He moved his head to see what was happening, then closed his eyes. He told himself he would look again when he was instructed to crawl on. Or when five minutes had passed. The whole thing could only take minutes, surely?

On his high perch, Wilkie sat motionless, trying to stitch together his resolve. He gazed down on the deserted site. From up here he was in control. For the moment, godlike, he could dispose of all five lives. The duckboard platform, the shaft mouth, the hill of spoil, the mud and confusion

suggested a First World War landscape; the Somme, perhaps, after the action had moved on elsewhere.

Beyond the edge of the site the big dumper was backed into a niche in the hill of spoil. It was full. Ten tons of earth and rock and rubble.

He climbed down from the cab of the crane. Impossible to keep his mind blank. But he would not think of people. No people were involved in this, he told himself. Only actions—simple actions. Leave them undone and you stay a middle-aged loser. Undertake them, mindlessly, one by one, and you change your whole life. Never a sentimental man, he was disturbed to find himself hesitating still. Maureen Keyes . . .

Wilkie forced himself to think of something else. Keyes was a drag. So what if she fancied him? He wasn't a romantic either. Better any one of a score of showgirls with legs all the way up to their armpits who did it for the money. He crossed the platform quietly and glanced down. He couldn't see shaft bottom anyway, but there was no sound. Why was he creeping about? He was just moving around, that was all.

He stepped down on the far side of the platform and hoisted himself into the saddle of the dumper.

After a moment of frozen anxiety he started the motor, startled by the noise. So what? he rationalised. Nothing in that.

He took the wheel, swung the dumper out in a wide arc to his right, reversed and let it crawl back, up on to the edge of the platform. Still he had done nothing irrevocable. The crunch was only now. He kept the motor running, glanced back. He was perfectly in position.

All that was required was one movement. His left hand closed over the lever. Did he have the guts, the nerve? Again the paralysis of indecision gripped him. He closed his eyes, the sun warm on his face and neck. He didn't even have to look . . .

Waiting in the tunnel, Brooks thought that if she could have come down alone, or perhaps with Alan, crept into the tunnel, looked and then backed out all in one movement, she

might have managed. But this waiting . . . Panic seized her. She moved back, stopped, bit her lip in exasperation. Eyes closed, she tried to rally. Perhaps if she stood in the shaft for a moment she could come to it, acclimatise herself, like a swimmer dipping a toe, then a foot, in the water, absorbing the shock by degrees. She moved back again, halted. And again. When she looked up her head was clear of the tunnel. She was kneeling on the shaft bottom. The fright ebbed. She stood up, trembling. For a moment or two she leaned against the north wall of the shaft, watching the dim movement of light in the tunnel. They probably didn't even realise she wasn't in there with them. It was no use. She couldn't go back in.

On shaking legs she stood straight and pulled the bell line.

Wilkie heard it with a stab of fear. He breathed hard. Had he missed the chance after all? He took his hand off the tip-lever, waiting for his head to clear.

They hadn't been down long enough for all of them to have worked their way up the slope and back along the tunnel.

Who was last in? Maureen. Goddam Keyes. Collier had said they would all move in past the passageway, last in taking first look and then backing out to leave room.

He felt an enormous weight lifting from him. He had lost the chance. Too bad. Too fucking bad, Hillier. Tough tit. He got down from the dumper and hurried across to the crane.

Yet even as he started the motor and swung the grab towards the shaft, he began to feel the let-down. No million. No snappy clothes. No suave, restyled, remodelled Wilkie, jetting about Europe. No Vegas girls, no Acapulco beach adventures, no stunning Brazilian broads.

Stunned by his disappointment he sat brooding until the bell rang again. He pushed the lever forward and the grab began to rise.

By the time it came clear of the shaft he had changed his mind completely and conceived a deep loathing for Maureen. The little creep was always doing something wrong.

But it wasn't Maureen.

It was Brooks Remsen.

He stared. They must have changed places in the line-up. And she was alone, too.

He got down from the crane as soon as the bucket touched the platform.

"Sorry," Brooks called when he was still hurrying across, "I couldn't make it. If they'd been quicker I might have. But they hadn't even moved one forward."

Wilkie's mind buzzed. They were all still in the tunnel. Only Brooks up. It *wasn't* too late. He moved towards her, unsure of his intentions.

". . . feel so stupid," Brooks was saying. "A real dummy." And then, "Are you all right?"

She came into focus. Wilkie had no idea what to do with her. But with the rest still in the tunnel anything was possible. He heard himself say, croakily, "Shouldn't feel bad about it. Happens to plenty of guys." He forced himself to relax, dropping into a hands-in-pockets, waiting, stone-kicking posture.

"Right," Brooks said. She made a rueful face. "All the same, I feel stupid." She looked around, saw the Jeep. "What I think I'll do, I'll go back and do something about some lunch."

Brilliant, Wilkie thought. Do that. He tried to look unconcerned. "Take the Jeep, why don't you?" He paced aimlessly along the rim of the platform.

"Tell them, will you?" Brooks lifted a hand and walked across to the Jeep. Wilkie turned his back and watched the rippling salt-marsh. He heard the Jeep start and then creak across the rough ground to the camp track.

He waited until he judged it was out of sight, then climbed back on to the dumper. Closed his eyes. Felt for the lever. Thought about sun-tanned women, smooth and groomed and gleaming with health and nodding and smiling "Yes" at him. And slammed the lever into the tip position.

It was done.

35

Maureen had evidently been small enough to turn round completely in the passageway. Jake Ritson was surprised to see her reappear urgently, head first, after only a few seconds. "Oh God! It's so dark," she shouted, her voice rattling down the main tunnel. "Nothing . . . to . . . see. Just a big hole. Christ-let-me-out!" She pointed herself towards the shaft and retreated rapidly. It was suddenly very quiet when she apparently reached shaft bottom and stood up.

Jake Ritson eased into the passageway and Bentinck, next to go, felt a little better. He bobbed his head at his watch again. Another five minutes had gone. Five more and it would be all over. He was learning something. What you did was screw yourself up tight and hold on, wait it out. Just that: hold on. You *endured*. Once you'd done it a repeat wasn't too difficult.

Ritson emerged in a minute or two. "Jesus!" he said, his helmet-lamp boggling at Bentinck. "This guy Bowman. He gets away with this, he's a man to follow." He eased his legs round towards Bentinck. "Pardon me." He turned his head towards the shaft. "I think Maureen had something there. Okay, your turn, sport." He crawled away, muttering to himself.

Like a train shunting back over the points to make a turn, Bentinck followed Ritson backwards until his head was level with the hole in the tunnel wall, then pointed himself left at the glimmer from Collier's lamp lighting the passageway softly.

A new sound ricocheted along the tunnel as he did so. "Hey!" Maureen's voice shouted. Bentinck heard it but made no sense of it.

On Bowman's orders, two more bricks had been removed

since the finding to make it easier to see inside, but nothing more had been done.

Bentinck reached the top of the slope, came on to the level area outside the vault wall and congratulated himself on getting this far. A quick look through the hole—and out. No, dammit, he'd got this far, he might as well look properly, take his time. He straightened up on his knees.

At the moment that he put his head into the hole there was a terrible sound: a scream which died slowly, as if drowned out by the reverberation which followed. For a moment Bentinck thought the tunnel itself had begun to collapse. He snatched his head back from the hole in alarm. The rumbling roar was accompanied by movement under his knees. The very air vibrated. Bentinck lay flat, hugging the ground in terror. When the roar died, it was followed almost at once by a rush of air and dust, issuing from the main tunnel. Even here it billowed up from the tunnel, causing him to catch his breath and gag on it.

Everything was still.

He got to his knees again. For a moment he thought the ground still moved. When he put out a hand to the wall he realised it was he who shook.

"What the hell was that?" he called out, surprising himself with the calm and strength of his voice.

He heard Collier coughing close at hand. Thank God! The unspeakable fear of being alone underground, of Collier's having been killed by some tunnel fall, died at the moment of surfacing in his mind.

"Nothing good," Collier said conversationally, from somewhere even closer. "Let's take a look."

At the tunnel mouth Ritson was fighting for his life.

Nearing shaft bottom, he had heard Maureen's yelp of anxiety. There was another sound he couldn't identify; perhaps the hum of machinery. What machinery? He speeded up towards the tunnel mouth.

At the moment his head emerged into the tunnel he had perhaps two seconds in which to react. He saw Maureen, head thrown back, staring upward, one hand on the shoring

of the north wall for balance. Saw her hit by an avalanche of spoil and broken rock. Saw her fall backwards and immediately disappear under the crushing weight and volume of it.

He thrust himself out into the shaft, his instinct to go to her. For perhaps one second the avalanche seemed to wane. Then the noise and blotting out of the lights told him differently.

For the moment the falling spoil was sloped unevenly against the north and east walls. He tried to get to his feet, aiming at the west wall. A mammoth weight hit him in the back. He fell, his legs trapped, the torrent swallowing him rapidly.

Other rocks hit him—one, the size of a fist, on the back of his head, leaving a deep gash that immediately began to fill with blood. But, in his mad frenzy, he felt nothing.

Screaming inwardly, he contorted his body frantically. His legs flailed free, were covered, seized, entombed. Thrusting upwards, he broke loose his shoulders. His legs remained trapped.

Somewhere at the core of his terror, there was an ice-cold mechanism which took control. Grunting, sobbing, he continued to fight. His arms heaved, broke surface, clawed, pressed, pulled. With his arms free, he flung his body feverishly from side to side. Spoil rolled remorselessly over him. And again he broke free.

Finding himself close to the south wall he grabbed at the shoring, missing by a foot or more. He realised he was about to die like Maureen. In a final agony of terror, he bent himself forward, straining every muscle, then back. The spoil gave a little. And again he launched himself at the south wall, grabbed—and held.

With something to hold, he fought for a second grip, found one, writhed and pulled and thrust until his shoulders were free.

He rested. With a grip on the shoring he might survive. The survival mechanism told him that the fall must stop. If he could keep his head and arms free until it did, he could ultimately dig himself out.

The maelstrom from above waned and died.

Ritson couldn't look up. For the moment the cause of the fall was unimportant. If it could happen once it could happen again. Holding on with one hand, he began clawing with the other at the rubble in front of him, like a swimmer using the crawl. When his chest was clear he rested, sucking in great gulps of dust-laden air. But the pressure on his legs and the panicky sensation of their entrapment drove him on. As he dug the work became more exhausting. To get free he had first to throw the spoil back in a widening arc. He watched fearfully over his shoulder at the hill of loose spoil behind him. It might not engulf him again, but it could keep him trapped for hours at this rate of progress. He could not risk that. Oblivious of his aching arms and raw hands, he worked on steadily, careful to keep his funnel of escape as broad as possible to avoid doing the work twice.

It took him twenty minutes to pull free. The last part was the most difficult. His feet, buried deep in impacted spoil, were immovable even when his knees were free. He threw his body repeatedly against the sloping sides of his hole, hammering it down. It gave him room enough to bend for the last effort.

When he crawled free he moved to the west wall and looked upwards. The familiar patch of sky was its regular shape. There was no sign of movement up there. He sat down, shaking, the muscles seized now with a fierce reaction as if they had turned to jelly.

Only then did he become conscious of the ache in the back of his skull. He reached up, and his hand came away sticky with blood and dust. He spat on his fingers, tried to wipe them clean—a vain gesture—and felt again. The cut was wider than his fingertips, but the powdered spoil mixed with the blood had formed a pad, slowed the bleeding to a slight ooze. Ritson drew his hand away quickly. It was not just the pain of probing—he had no wish to cause further damage.

He shook his head gently, opened and closed his eyes a few times. No dizziness. After such a blow he thought he ought to be concussed, yet he remembered everything.

He gazed upwards, testing his vision, but also concerned about the patch of sky. If anything at all disturbed its curve, he would have to go up the shoring, and fast. For the moment that was completely unthinkable.

Suddenly, he remembered that Collier and Bentinck were still in the tunnel, and other thoughts disappeared from his mind. He had twisted and grabbed and writhed, almost corkscrewing up through the fall. The tunnel mouth was somewhere below him. Where? He looked round at the staging. Perhaps eight or ten feet below. Well, for the moment they were in no danger.

Though Bentinck had never admitted to claustrophobia, Collier had often seen in him the symptoms under tight control. It wasn't noticeable in any spurious bravado or nonchalance, but in marginally uncharacteristic behaviour. Under the stress of his fear, Bentinck tended to chatter, and gave those nearest him the kind of close focus, almost comic in its intensity, seen only in the mildly drunk.

So when he reached the closed tunnel mouth, his dismay was primarily for Bentinck.

The look of the tunnel itself had confirmed his fears before he reached the end. The air was still thick with dust. And spoil, closing the shaft end, had fallen in before impacting, forming a long tongue reaching inwards.

"Bloody rocks," Bentinck muttered behind him, encountering rubble that had trickled towards them.

"The least of our troubles," Collier said. "What we've got here is a fall of some kind which has sealed the shaft end." He rolled on to his left elbow, brought his feet round and shoved them up against the opposite wall. With his knees bent, the tunnel end was effectively screened from Bentinck.

"What's that? A fall?" There was a brittle sound to Bentinck's voice.

"Just have to wait," Collier said, affecting ill humour rather than anxiety. He held his watch up and nodded his helmet-lamp to it. "Late lunch for everyone."

Bentinck said nothing. His disappointment was keen. He had held on thus far, holding out to himself the promise of

freedom and fresh air. As so often, his fear of showing fear was greater than that of the danger itself. For the moment he couldn't think about anything else.

The silence endured so long that Collier added, quietly, "I think we may be down here a while. It sounded like a helluva fall. And maybe two guys won't be much use. They may have to get help from the freighter. It may take time. Like I say, late lunch all round." He rubbed at his eyes, stinging from the dust, and found a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket. "Might as well relax."

He had finished the cigarette before Bentinck spoke again.

"How the hell did it happen?"

Collier had been brooding about just that. The shaft was dry enough, and though the shoring wasn't terrific it ought to have been adequate. Some carelessness with the grab? Buckled shoring, a gash in the unprotected wall? It was possible. And had Ritson got up safely? No sense in voicing that worry yet.

But he was bothered by something else.

In his mind he had run a professional eye around the site as it had been when they started down. Something up there had been wrong. What?

Collier was also struck by a thought so wild that he dismissed it at once as a touch of hysteria on his part. Wilkie, Maureen and Brooks were all up there. Safe. Ritson too, probably. With Bowman. Only he and Bentinck were trapped. Did that, could that, serve some purpose of Bowman's?

Crap! He sighed, yawned elaborately, hoping it might fool Bentinck. "When the air clears a bit," he said, "I'll try shouting. We don't know how much fall there is. It may be within the scope of Jake and Wilk to shift it. Yelling will help."

"Um," Bentinck said. He flopped on to his right side, resting his head on his outflung arm. His hard-hat toppled off. With his free hand he put it down a foot or two ahead of him. As an afterthought he switched off the lamp. It gave him the opportunity to say, in the spirit of Captain Oates, "Might as well save one battery."

"Or both," Collier said, plunging them into total darkness.

Bentinck's bowel contracted with fear. As long as he could see Collier he had been somehow comforted. He lifted his head to protest but nothing he could think of saying sounded right. He rested his head again and closed his eyes. Perhaps in a few minutes they would hear something from the shaft and it would be all over.

He forced himself to think about Wendy.

Only a few feet away, Jake Ritson was thinking about Annie again.

Like Bentinck, Ritson had been brought to Dirk's by the need for money. Money for a woman.

His disappointment with the enquiry agent, Sherman, only made him more determined. Next time, he told himself again, he would do it right. Hire a good man from an established outfit, someone on a leash. If there was a prize on Dirk's for him, it was Annie—or the money that would find her. She was worth finding. She had guts, character, humour and an appetite for love. He wanted her back—and badly. It would take money to find her and then money to give her what he'd failed to give her first time round.

After this, after Dirk's, he could begin . . .

For a few more minutes he sprawled. He was baffled by Wilkie's failure to appear at the shaft head, shouting down that help was coming. Why hadn't he got Brooks on the crane by now and come down to look for himself?

It was always possible, of course, that Wilkie had been at some distance from the shaft head when the fall occurred. He just might not have heard it. Okay, but where was the bastard now? The bucket ought to be back down by now.

Ritson strained to see the condition of the upper shaft. It looked good enough as far as he could see. Was the fall from near the head? Impossible to tell. The sun was over to the west by now and the mouth was in deep shadow.

Where the hell *was* Wilkie?

Slowly, working it out, muttering to himself, Ritson became convinced that something was wrong. The conviction became solid and numbed his thinking. Two possibilities.

One, Wilkie had seen the fall, assumed they were all entombed and had gone off for help. Two, he had seen the fall and meant to let them rot down here. If so, why? Nothing in it for Wilkie.

A third idea seized Ritson. There had been no fall.

He looked around at the spoil under his feet, looking for answers, for confirmation or rebuttal. He could tell nothing. It was just spoil.

But the very possibility that Wilkie had tried to entomb them broke through his inertia. It spooked him, moving his back hair. He looked around desperately.

The shoring. If there had been a fall it was suicidal to attempt to climb it to the top, even supposing he had the strength. Nonetheless he tried it out, hanging his weight on the lateral ribs only eight or so feet off shaft bottom. They held, firmly.

It was then that he heard a new sound which chilled him in the moment of translation. The sound was that of the bulldozer. Faint, but unmistakable.

If Wilkie was driving the bulldozer—and who else, for Christ's sake?—then he wasn't fetching help.

Ritson waited no longer. He began to climb. The shoring was good. No trouble there. He couldn't get his feet right into the close-fitted shoring. Just the toes.

Up he went, finger and toe hold. A straight vertical climb imposes twice the strain of climbing a ladder. Only fear and anger made it possible for him to keep moving. After thirty feet he had to stop and rest. His legs were trembling violently again. His head was pounding as though the whole of the back half of his skull wanted to split away from the rest of his head.

Despite his precarious position, he had to fight not to close his eyes. The noise saved him—the dozer was moving off. He let his breath out through his wide-open mouth to diminish the sound. Listening, he heard the bulldozer moving away.

With the realisation that Wilkie was up there, not going for help, not attempting to get them out, apparently uncaring whether they were in or out of the tunnel, on or under the spoil, his rage grew.

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Timing, Wilkie realised, was going to be crucial. Having now taken the dangerous first step, he had somehow to control very closely the order of everything that flowed from it. It wasn't simply a matter of making the right moves. Each would have a natural sequence. If he didn't get that right he would be finished.

He remained a few moments in the saddle of the dumper, his hand still on the lever, shocked. It was done. It could scarcely be undone.

Or could it? Oppressed by the responsibility for what he had undertaken, he teased himself with the idea of pulling out, even now. Would Collier and Bentinck ever believe that he had dumped ten tons of spoil into the tunnel mouth accidentally? That his hand had slipped? That he had meant to back the dumper off? Hardly. Not even if he raised the alarm now, at once, and pulled them out personally, disgruntled but unharmed.

His loathing for Hillier flared briefly. He was on his own. Nothing about how it was to be done, what to watch out for, what might happen in consequence. Just the choice. Stop them and grow rich, or work your ass off the next twenty years until you're too old to enjoy even the goddam pension. Take it or leave it.

Too late Wilkie realised he had held stronger cards. If he had a lot to lose, Hillier had much more. The bitch of it was, Hillier was out there on the yacht and he, Wilkie, was the one right here making the decisions, taking the risks.

Bitterly, Wilkie made up his mind. He backed the dumper off the platform and drove it round the hill of spoil out of sight.

When he got down he was surprised to find his hands

slippery with sweat. His legs, too, felt odd: as if they were transplants, as yet unused to moving to order. He took off his hard-hat, feeling the sea breeze drying his scalp.

What next? Opening the sea traps was one thing. Raising the alarm was another. If he went out to South Beach now there was some danger that the Remsen girl might return, see what had happened and create problems. Tension tightened his chest and he gulped air furiously. It was probably better to be sure that he knew where she was and what she was doing before anything else.

He came back to the platform agitatedly. No sound from below. The flatbed truck which had brought them out was still beyond the crawler crane. Now—rush into camp, declare an emergency, keep her occupied . . .

There was more than a little actor in Wilkie. He stood with his arms hanging loose, letting the feel, the flavour of anxiety build in him. "Oh Christ!" he said aloud, as if a genuine shaft fall had taken place at this very moment.

He wiped Hillier out of his mind. Wiped out, too, the Wilkie with the craving for all the women a million could buy. He was Mr. Nice Guy again. "Oh, Jeezus!" he said, feeling himself into the part. And, turning, raced for the flatbed.

There was no one to see the punishing ride into camp at high speed and probably Brooks never heard the squeal of brakes as he came up on to the tarmac. But it *felt* right, looked right, convinced Wilkie himself.

He threw open the mess-hall door. "Brooks!" he yelled urgently. "Brooks!"

Startled, Brooks came round the counter, wiping her hands on a huge apron. Why did she look so frightened? She knew nothing yet.

"Leave whatever you're doing," Wilkie panted. "There's been a goddam fall in the shaft. They're all stuck down there and we're goin' to need some help. Get on the radio, will you, and get a bunch of the *Hill* crew over here fast. Okay?"

"Oh God," Brooks whispered. "I had a feeling about this morning . . . Is anyone hurt? How did it happen?" The

questions came out with a rush, but even while she waited for the answers more thoughts flooded into her mind. Was everyone else dead? Were she and Wilkie the only two left alive? It was a nightmare, a horror story. They were being picked off one by one.

Wilkie was pressing on, almost too quickly. If she had a feeling, he didn't want to hear about it. "Look, we don't get panicky, that's first. No one is hurt that I know of. They're in there and they're going to be goddam hungry by the time they get out is all." He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door. "Best thing you can do is get on the radio for me. Tell them what's happened. I don't want to hang around here, I want to get down there. I can shout that guys are on their way to dig 'em out. Okay?"

Pale, Brooks took a deep breath and straightened up. "Right," she said calmly. "How many men do you need? What should they bring with them?"

"Nothing, nothing!" Wilkie scowled. Wait a minute, though, the longer the message . . . "Yeah, get me the ten best men they got. And tell 'em to set up a supply of hot food. We ain't got time to horse around with food this end. Bring their own and some to spare."

Nodding, Brooks touched his arm as she swung left towards the radio shack. "Nothing else?"

"Not from them. When you're sure they're on the way, wait here and bring them out with you. Goddam sailors, who knows, they could end up over the other side of the island or something." He saw the unloaded diesel truck outside the big store and stabbed a finger at it. "Get 'em on that when they arrive and bring 'em out to me. Listen, I gotta get back." He broke into a run, swung aboard the flatbed and roared off back down the track. She was already in the radio shack, the tarmac apron behind him deserted as he checked his mirror before gunning the motor down the slope.

A very convincing performance, Wilkie told himself. Just the right amount of concern, the authentic sound of the man of action meeting crisis calmly but without delay. He felt more in control now. Could Hillier have done it better? Doubtful. Smug bastard. All he knew was money.

Just the same, there was no time to lose. He began watching out of his left window. There was a point along here where the land fell away in a dip. You could see the state of the tide clearly. He checked his watch. It ought to be retreating now.

Yes, there it was. He could see the ebb in the look of the spartina closest to the dunes. Instead of flopping about in the water like weed, it stood up and dried out with a kind of salty sparkle.

Next? Down to South Beach in the dozer and ram open at least a couple of the outlets. More if there was time. Nothing subtle. Just shift the goddam sand and spoil off them and leave them. No one was going to be out there.

What about dozer tracks? No matter. If he took it right now, while the sand was wet, they'd fade out anyway. And with the turn of the tide, later, the whole thing would be fudged over.

The flatbed was really flying, bucking over the ruts. He wondered how far Brooks had got. Probably not even through yet. She wouldn't talk to crew. She'd ask for Bowman or Hillier. Minutes lost while either came on the radio. Explain what had happened. Issue orders. Wait while they assembled. Get them into the launch. He reckoned he was all right for about twenty minutes or so yet, before they even got started. And once they did, well South Beach was out of sight of the east coast anyway.

Wilkie put the flatbed back alongside the crane and trotted briskly towards the dozer. It was agonising that the goddam thing wouldn't move any faster, but he could monitor his time all the way. No panic.

He started up and crawled the dozer south west through the scrub pine, following the trackmarks from the earlier work of neutralising the sea traps. "Come on, come on," he fumed. It made no sense, but he had the uneasy feeling, out here in the open, that someone, somewhere, could see him. The sooner he got down on the beach the better he'd like it. Out there you couldn't even see the beach until you were on top of it.

He tried to take the dozer over the edge of the dunes as a short cut and immediately regretted it. Half a dozen feet from

the lip, the offside wheels found a deep rut in the soft sand and the dozer canted over. Cautiously, he moved a foot or two and simply dug himself in more deeply, the dozer listing dangerously. Christ, not now! He'd done it right so far.

He put the dozer into reverse. Another fright. For a moment nothing happened except an ominous rocking. Then the dozer scrabbled down to firmer footing and backed off gingerly. It was a nasty moment.

The safe way down was following the tracks. Once down he was only thirty yards from the most westerly of the outlets.

Tides had nibbled at the hills of sand but they still looked formidable. Strung out in a semi-circle the seaward, outermost line was the one to tackle. Wilkie rubbed a hand over his face, gunned the motor and headed for the nearest.

The motor roared, the dozer bit and shoved and bucked. He was isolated by the noise. He sweated, pushing the machine to capacity. It was warm work, but most of all the noise worried him. He told himself again and again that it couldn't be heard in the camp, far less out at sea. But the unease remained. He felt exposed.

He wrestled the dozer into a succession of charges, biting deep into the sand, running it forward and down to the listless tide.

His work shirt was sodden with sweat. He kept one eye on the dunes, though he knew it wasn't possible that anyone could be there, could have reached him yet. He looked up and around, racked by the sheer din of the machine. This was something else Hillier would never understand, he told himself bitterly. A man had to kill, he liked to do it in the dark, or quick, or without noise. But this? Jesus! Massacre by machinery required more goddam nerve than Hillier or any other smug, front-office bastard would ever know. It was the most nervy goddam thing there was.

The first sandhill was almost flat. He was in danger of overrunning it, ramming the stuff down harder.

Checking on the time used, he moved on to the second hill, snuffling, grunting, wiping his face, almost whimpering with the effort required to keep himself there in the saddle under the blind, blue sky.

He kept it up, driving the machine to its limit, thrashing the motor. He was in a panic that the whole thing would give up on him, just blow a gasket and leave him not only with the traps partly open, but strand its goddam self right here, a useless, immovable, tell-tale monument to murder.

He glanced up at the dunes again.

Holy Christ! Something *was* there. A man? Standing there, against the sun. The sun was in his eyes. He couldn't see who or what.

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There was no one in sight when Ritson, gasping with the effort of the climb, clambered from the shaft, and collapsed, chest racked with great sobs as he sucked in air.

He was not sure how long he lay—he hoped it was only seconds—before he struggled to his knees and gazed around. No one.

There was something missing. Then he realised what it was—the dozer. At the precise same moment, he remembered the sound that had spurred him onwards as he had struggled up the shoring.

No Wilkie. No dozer. It could add up to only one thing—the inlets. He got to his feet, stood swaying, uncertain as to where to go, what to do. A rational man would have headed for camp. But Ritson was like a possessed shell of a man now; the rage had dropped, but thoughts whirled in a crazy cacophony in his mind. There was a mist in front of his eyes, and he fought to concentrate. Wilkie. No dozer. The inlets. The words echoed and repeated themselves, and mechanically he began following the tracks to the sea traps.

He stumbled through the scrub pine like an automaton, all sense of time gone, and reached the churned sand where

the dozer had almost overturned. He could hear the sound now.

The sun behind him, he paused, stared down through the mist that came and went across his eyes. Focusing was hard, and he had to look a long time before he was sure.

It was what he had expected, but even then it was hard to absorb. The bastard was opening the traps. Four of the seaward inlets were flat. The first tide would scour them free, swilling out the last of the sand and pouring thousands of gallons of sea-water into the bottled-up tunnel in which Bentinck and Collier were trapped.

From the moment he'd reached the top of the shaft, there had been only one explanation for what had happened. *There had been no fall*; the condition of the shaft and the shoring as he'd climbed upward had confirmed that. So what had closed the tunnel was spoil. Spoil from the dump. And that meant Wilkie.

Ritson took a step towards the sea, stumbled, righted himself and stood shakily. Below, he realised, the dozer had stopped. And Christ! Wilkie was standing in his seat, head turned in his direction, hand cupped over his eyes to shield out the sun.

He tried to weigh up the situation dispassionately, work out what he should do. He had to take Wilkie, of course. Gain control of the dozer, close the traps again. To stand any chance he needed to move away from the dunes, get the sea at his back. That would give him freedom of movement, escape.

Even as he thought it, he knew it was no use. In anything like normal conditions he could have run rings round Wilkie and the dozer. If Wilkie had got down from the machine he was sure that, big though the man was, he could have taken him.

But now! The truth was that he could hardly walk, let alone run. Just moving called for every ounce of strength he could muster; in a fight with Wilkie there could be only one result.

Wilkie was still staring, hand still held over his eyes. With the sun full into his face, he must be finding it hard to see anything. The thought opened Ritson's mind to a shaft of

reason. The only chance—for him, for those still trapped—was to do what he should have done in the first place. Get back to camp, raise an alarm. The fact that Wilkie was motionless, still staring, meant that he wasn't sure he had seen anything.

Ritson dropped to the sand and, his body flat, began to crawl over the top of the dune, not rising until he was on its blind side. As soon as he was sure he was no longer visible to Wilkie, he rose and began to move as fast as he could, bent forward, a bizarre sight as he staggered onward in a fast, lurching movement.

The pounding had started in his temples again, masking the harsh sounds of his own breathing; but he thought he could hear the sound of the dozer. He looked back, half fell, saw nothing, forced himself to keep moving. *If* Wilkie came after him he would expect him to follow the tracks back to the shaft, taking the fastest route. Through the haze it dawned on Ritson that a race, like a fight, was something he could not win.

He staggered off the track to the right, kept moving until he stumbled, crashed to his knees, his mouth full of silent obscenities. In the comparative silence he was sure he could hear the dozer now. He looked around, the landscape eerie through a film of red. He saw he had fallen over a shallow rift between the scrub. At least there was no choice now. He wriggled his body into the hollow as best he could, had a strange feeling that he heard a helicopter, and then the redness deepened, there was a spinning and a falling and, suddenly, nothing.

Whatever it was didn't move, just stood there. Wilkie, hand at his eyes, squinted into the sun, and could make out a shape, no more. But he was convinced it was a man. And not just any man. One particular one.

Ritson.

He stared for a long time, as though mesmerised. His thoughts whirled. He knew he had been right to watch the dunes. Stupid, maybe, but right all the time. Like a seventh sense. But if it was Ritson, how the hell had he got out? He

must have been out of the tunnel when the stuff began to fall and somehow crawled up the shoring and hung there, letting it settle below him, and then walked free on top of it.

A fucking miracle.

If it was anyone, of course. Not just a shape, a strange trick of the light, a figment even of his guilt! That last thought made him laugh inwardly. Guilt! Christ, when had he last felt that emotion?

A sudden sound added to his apprehensions. An engine—high above, a distance away. A helicopter or a light aircraft; it was so faint he could not be certain. It might mean nothing. On the other hand, it could be Bowman's chopper. Whatever, it stirred him to action.

He started the dozer and began moving forward again. In his preoccupation he ran into a sandhill, biting deep into it. The dozer coughed and stalled. Automatically, he restarted the machine and began backing out. He almost lost it again, but the flaw seemed to clear itself and the motor throbbed strongly.

He turned in a wide arc, pointing the machine towards where he had last seen the shape. It had gone now. If it was Ritson he would get him.

The machine clanked and rumbled back the way it had come, the scoop raised like the ram of some medieval war machine. Wilkie felt calm now. His expression was deadpan, a robot's humourless stare. Man and machine were one remorseless menace.

He cleared the dunes, and the sun became less of a problem. His eyes peeled the scrubland ahead, but nothing moved. Stopping the dozer, he stood high, and slowly and methodically swept the scene with his gaze.

He tried to place himself in Ritson's mind—*if* the shape had been Ritson, or anyone else for that matter. Why should anyone follow him and only then run to seek more help? If they suspected him, why not call in others right at the start? It didn't make sense. And if it was Ritson and if the man had followed him, then why didn't he fight now? No one who knew Ritson, had seen him in action, could deny he was a hard man. Not the kind to back off. So why do just that?

He could be hiding, of course, among the scrub out there. But why? Wilkie realised he was already beginning to doubt he had seen anything. Christ! Perhaps he *was* developing a conscience.

Still uncertain, the renewed sound of an engine decided him. Looking upwards, he could see nothing; and it sounded more like an aircraft than a helicopter now. Nothing to do with Bowman. Or Dirk's. Nevertheless, it reminded him that it was important he didn't remain down here any longer. The dozer had to be back on the site before the guys from the *Mulberry Hill* got out there with the Remsen kid. Maybe there weren't quite enough inlets cleared to fill the tunnel, not in one tide. But a tunnel that reached down to the level of shaft bottom had to have a hell of a slope. It was safe to assume that what water got into the open inlets would surge through, filling the shaft end first—and Collier and Bentinck should be caught down there. If not, the second tide would complete the job.

Wilkie eased the machine forward again, all fears and doubts suddenly gone. A faint smile flickered across the robot face. It seemed he could handle almost anything. He was beginning to feel like Horatio at the goddam bridge.

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"I've been shouting," Wilkie said, "but I don't hear anything." He met Brooks's eye uncomfortably and turned to Hillier instead. "'Course, that don't mean anything much. They could of been farther up the tunnel. Takin' a rest, anything. There's more room up in the vault section, too. You thought of that?"

If Hillier thought anything at all he never got a chance to voice it. Bowman himself, dapper in old-style military

suntans, stamped on to the platform. "Never mind the speculation," he said crisply. "Get these men into the shaft and start digging. Wilkie, you know best how it works. Maximum effort. No rest for anyone while they are down there. We'll work through the night if necessary."

"No, sir," Wilkie retorted. "We will not. It's too dangerous at night. Those guys down there are safer than we are. Hungry, maybe. But safe. No sense anyone else getting killed around here. We'll work until the light gets bad. And we'll start again at first light. That okay with you, General?"

Bowman's chin had flicked up and thrust out hearing an order countermanded by a man who would patently not have made any grade higher than master sergeant in the old Army. For a moment he glared icily, then conceded the point. "You know best, Wilkie. Just get it done as fast as you can." He turned, taking Brooks sympathetically by the elbow.

Hillier smiled fleetingly at Wilkie, acknowledging a master stroke.

Steered away from the platform by Bowman's firm grip, Brooks was mildly astonished when he said with gruff nonchalance, "Nothing to worry about, my dear. Wilkie assures me that a couple of hours' digging will clear down to the tunnel mouth. The shaft itself, he says, seems to have stabilised itself with that one fall."

"If it's safe now, how come there was a fall bad enough to block the tunnel?" Brooks retorted.

She watched him adjusting to her, remembering that she wasn't as gullible as some. "The, ah, thought had occurred to me," Bowman admitted. "But time enough for post mortems when we have them up safely."

Brooks pulled away impatiently and returned to the shaft head. A team from the *Hill* was assembling a fresh string of lights and checking out the cables. In a moment the generator roared into life. She decided she would stay on the lip of the shaft until the lights were down in the shaft and she could get some idea of what had happened.

Something was wrong. It was impossible to dismiss the irrational sensation of foreboding which had begun at the

moment of funking the tunnel itself. It must have affected Wilkie the same way, too, because he'd had that funny expression when she came up alone in the grab. She couldn't place it, but he'd been uneasy with her somehow. Had it been astonishment, that look? Indecision? She felt slightly breathless now, suddenly sure that she was near enough to the mark. Faces often said more than words . . .

What then did it mean? That Wilkie had something to hide? Something to do with the fall? Her pulse quickened. She turned to look at Bowman, momentarily assailed with the suspicion that this was all something to do with him. For a long time, nothing anywhere in Brooks's life had happened without Bowman having either ordered it or known about it.

But Bowman was standing, hands on hips, on the opposite side of the shaft, his forehead furrowed with impatience. She watched him carefully. His was another face she could read. On the spot she decided he was guiltless. The man she knew was ruthless, domineering and disdainful, but not a man who could either kill or order killing. She almost smiled with the relief.

Back to Wilkie then? Again and again she replayed in her mind the moment she had returned to the platform before he could possibly have anticipated it. And her conviction grew that she had cause to worry about Wilkie.

Loftus, stripped to the waist, was climbing into the grab. Wilkie was up on the crane now, high above. She stared at his face intently, trying to read there some further ground for her fears and doubts.

The lights were lowered. Loftus would secure them at intervals down the shoring.

Hillier appeared at her elbow and stood silent, watching with her.

She said very quietly, without looking at him, "Tell me this was just another unlucky accident, Borden."

Startled, Hillier mimed bewilderment. "I don't think I understand, Brooks."

"Was it just an accident?" she insisted. "Was it?"

Hillier shook his head as if to clear it. "I can't imagine

why you're asking that, but yes, of course it was. What else?"

Brooks looked up at him appealingly. "It wasn't . . ." She bit her lip, locked her gaze on his. "It was nothing Alex . . . wanted?" Realising how odd it sounded, she added in a rush, "I don't know. Alex gets carried away sometimes with his own ambitions. We both know he goes to extraordinary lengths . . . It just seems to me that there is something wrong here. I don't know what. But I think Wilkie does."

"Wilkie?" Hillier echoed. "*Wilkie*?"

Brooks squatted, bracing herself on the platform edge with her hands. She must have claimed Hillier's attention because he squatted beside her. "When I was offered a look at the vault," Brooks said, "I went down. I didn't really want to go, though. And I freaked out at the last minute. When I came up again in the grab, I'm sure Wilkie was—displeased, upset."

"Well, he'd be surprised—if he thought you were in the tunnel," Hillier said reasonably.

"*More* than surprised," Brooks decided. "Displeased. For a moment there he didn't seem to know what to do about me. I . . . I have the impression my coming up like that threw him out some way."

When Hillier said nothing she added, "Is there some way that Wilkie could even have caused the fall?"

"Brooks!" Hillier protested. He stood up, as if affronted by the suggestion. He looked around carefully, studied her face for a moment and then said, "You really mean this? You have doubts about Wilkie?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"But why?" Hillier frowned. "Why would he do that? How could Wilkie benefit by causing a fall?"

For a long time Brooks said nothing. The walls of the shaft were illuminated now all the way down to the uneven layer of spoil enclosing the tunnel mouth. But there was nothing to be seen. No shattered shoring, no collapsed supports. The new surface of the shaft bottom told her nothing.

"I wasn't thinking of Wilkie alone," she said at last.

When Hillier still said nothing, she looked up at him sharply.

He nodded. "I heard you," he said. "But I can scarcely believe it. You think—good God, it's outrageous even to voice it—that Alex . . ." he threw up his hands. He took a step or two away as if pained by such talk then, pivoting, wandered close again. "I'll tell you what I think. I think everyone will be better off away from this island, not least someone like yourself, unused to this kind of environment and company."

Brooks stood up and reached for his hand. With only fractional hesitation he let her take it. "I'm sorry," she said. "Alex is your friend. Mine, too, I'm sure. But Wilkie—that's another matter."

Hillier pressed her hand. "Forget it, Brooks. Fanciful nonsense. But just to please you I'll give what you've said some thought." He looked around again to be sure they couldn't be heard. "And I'll come back to you if I'm not entirely satisfied."

She had never really warmed to Hillier, but supposed now that his lofty, detached manner might be something developed as a defence against Alex. She'd had to make several shifts of ground herself, goodness knew, in an attempt to preserve her dignity and her own personality from Bowman's automatic dominance.

"Leave it to me," Hillier repeated, moving away. He smiled at her gravely, holding on to her hand, making sure she understood that the responsibility was now his. Perversely his final gesture had the effect of increasing her anxiety. Brooks watched him go, alarmed. What had she said that was so convincing? In her experience it was out of character for Borden Hillier to be earnest about anything at all. She chewed her lip. There were two possibilities. One was that what she'd said had impressed him, perhaps found some echo in his own thinking. In which case she was right to worry about Wilkie. The other? She groped for it. That Hillier and Wilkie . . .? No, that was absurd, unbelievable.

Unbelievable? More so than this whole episode in her life? More than finding Collier, and in the way that she had? More

than the camp, the drilling, the discovery of the vault, the accidents . . .?

Her heart thumped frighteningly. The accidents!

She looked up at Wilkie on the crawler crane, stared at him willing him to feel it and look back. If she was imagining all this, it would be natural for him to grin, perhaps wave, give her some sign expressing encouragement. If it made him uneasy . . .

She had to stare for a long time. The grab went down, came up loaded, swung out to the dumper, released its load and vanished again down the shaft. In a moment of relaxation Wilkie looked about him, caught her eye and was jolted. He had enough sense not to look away but, without moving his head, looked imperceptibly past her to the group on the west side of the shaft, and past them, and then with what he thought was a natural moment of recollection, back at the shaft. What the hell was she staring like that for? What did she think she knew? It was an effort not to glance back. He didn't want to check on it, but he had the uncomfortable feeling now that she was doing it all the time. Just sitting there, staring at him.

His failure to respond as she felt he ought filled Brooks with foreboding. Her mind raced ceaselessly over the implications. That Alan, and the others, were sealed into the tunnel was obvious. But how could that be so dreadful? She had seen them go in. In a way they were safe enough. Given that Wilkie had engineered a fall somehow, how did that threaten them and how could it profit either Wilkie or whoever had induced him to undertake such a thing?

The sun was well over in the west now. It was still warm, but the shadows were lengthening. She saw the arrival of the Jeep, loaded with sandwiches and coffee. The crews lined up, squatted around the edges of the platform to eat. Even Hillier and Bowman drank a cup of coffee, standing. The only people who didn't move were Wilkie and herself.

The Jeep left. The grab went down with two fresh men. Round the platform they settled in to wait.

The bell rang and Wilkie responded. The grab came up empty, one of the crew riding the shackle and cable. Brooks

recognised him vaguely as a steward. He stepped down from the grab, looked around for Loftus and went directly to him.

Brooks got up. Whatever the man said had galvanised Loftus, who raced across to Bowman. Hillier leaned close to hear. A knot of anxious men formed quickly.

"What is it?" Brooks demanded. She came up behind Bowman and grasped his arm.

Bowman glanced round at her. "Bring her up," he directed Loftus. He turned to Brooks. "Bad news, I'm afraid. It seems the girl has been found. She was caught in the fall."

Stunned, Brooks tightened her grip on his arm. Bowman unlocked her fingers firmly and strode to the platform. For a moment Brooks was pierced by the fear that the fall had taken place while they were all standing at shaft bottom. But that couldn't be, or they'd have found the others too. Poor Maureen! Tears she was unaware of filled her eyes.

On the lip of the shaft Bowman watched the grab rising. He marched purposefully across to the crawler-crane and barked orders to Wilkie. Then he beckoned Loftus and Hillier.

Brooks watched, stricken, as the grab came up. Her distress was heightened by the realisation that she had completely forgotten Maureen in her concern for Collier and Bentinck. The boom rose, too, carrying its load high in the air before swinging round a hundred and eighty degrees away from the watchers on the platform.

Loftus came back from behind the crane, shooing his men back on to the site. "All right, all right," he said. "Let's keep at it. Three people down there want to see daylight today. Come on, you men. Next pair down the hole right now."

Away from the platform Bowman and a tight lipped Hillier had backed the Waggoneer up into the space between the weather cabin and the lumber pile. The grab yawned open. They bent and came up, between them, with the limp, mud-covered burden which had been Maureen Keyes.

Brooks returned to her chosen spot on the west side of the platform. Cross-legged, she sat with her head bowed. She no

longer wanted to stare at Wilkie. She felt too tired, too drained for further thought. Shock numbed her mind. She had no idea of the time, felt no hunger, nothing. Her mind crouched, fearing further assaults.

Around her, activity stepped up. The landing craft appeared at the mouth of the salt-marsh and attempted to bull its way ashore. Loftus left the site and took charge. In a complicated series of manoeuvres he backed it off successfully and beached it at a point halfway between the site and Falla Beach. Fresh faces from the freighter appeared on site, talking more loudly than those who had witnessed the recovery of Maureen Keyes's body. Two men brought a bundle of stretchers up to the platform and were promptly bawled out by Bowman, who ordered them away. Watching dully, Brooks understood from Bowman's nervous glance in her direction that their removal was to save her distress.

It wasn't until after six that the real blow fell.

She heard it first—with a shock that was like a physical blow. Heard the muffled *fflump* from somewhere below her feet, heard it in the queer, concerted moan of alarm from those on the shaft lip, and in the panicky, ant-like scampering of those who, having worked in the shaft these last hours, understood at once the nature of the disaster.

Over the din, the shaft bell rang insistently. The grab whipped up and hovered, swinging, over the platform, bearing two frightened men. Pale and wild-eyed, their sodden clothes hung on them, streaked with mud, salted sea-water scum.

The sea trap at shaft bottom was open.

39

Bentinck woke from a deep sleep and vivid dreams of the Cotswold countryside in summer. His instant, waking dismay was partly offset by astonishment that he could have slept at all, and by the encouraging thought that he might be able to pass more time that way.

When he thought he could produce a steady voice, he directed it towards the spot in which Collier had been sitting. "Sorry about that," he said. "Must have dozed off." It gave him enormous satisfaction that he had shown a calm he couldn't have commanded.

Collier grunted, shifting his weight. "They're working in the shaft," he said.

Jubilant, Bentinck held his breath, listening. It was true. Voices, the occasional clank of the grab, the steady bite of shovels. He beamed in the dark, the faint sounds warming him and washing away more of his fear and anxiety. "God, I'm hungry," he said cheerfully.

There was another long silence before his joy ebbed a little. He realised Collier had expressed no comparable pleasure. Worried again, he said, "You don't sound terribly excited . . ."

Collier roused himself, clearing his throat. "I'm pleased. You'd better believe it. *And* hungry."

Collier couldn't be thought of as an excitable man, but this much restraint struck Bentinck as ludicrous. He replayed Collier's words and tone over to himself and found more puzzlement than delight in them. "You're surprised," he accused the darkness ahead of him. "You didn't expect them to open up the shaft!"

Collier hesitated. There was, after all, no mistaking the sound of rescue. "No," he admitted. "I didn't. I was half sure the fall was no accident."

Bentinck was shocked. "I'm bloody glad you didn't tell me that." He heard Collier shift again and in a moment his lighter flared; the light almost painfully bright. Blinking, Bentinck took in the litter of cigarette butts at Collier's side. He tuned in again to the reassuring sounds of work, then said, "Do you want to enlarge on that?"

Collier laughed. "Well, I had this crazy idea that maybe Bowman planned to keep one hundred per cent of the stuff for himself. Or maybe had some other reason why we were all in his way. I thought about Terrill's idea, that we were all specially chosen. If we got swallowed up by Dirk's, nobody was going to fret too much. That kind of thing. But it didn't make sense. Bowman's a winner anyway. This kind of caper would be too much risk."

Bentinck chewed that over for a moment. With the work of rescue plainly audible, he felt able to demolish any such pessimistic nonsense. "You overlooked Wilkie, though. Wilkie was still up there," he said triumphantly.

"Um," Collier said.

"Um? What the hell's that mean?"

"You're offering Wilkie as a comfort? I took Wilkie into my thought about Bowman. I mean, someone had to rig or cause a fall, if rigged it was."

"I see," Bentinck said bleakly. "And I was worried about the air."

"The air?" Collier echoed. "There's a tunnel full of that. If you had wanted something to worry about—why not the sea traps?"

Some minutes drifted by. Bentinck closed his eyes again, not believing he could repeat his sleep. He focused on the noises from the shaft. It wasn't his imagination. They were closer. He smiled and drifted into a half-sleep, in which the only impediment was the way his head lolled forwards, straining his neck muscles.

His mind wandered happily on the surface, sniffing at the sea, marvelling at cloud formations, not in the least troubled at the way in which the broken scrub of the central plain of Dirk's became Cornish tin-mine country, pitted and scarred by centuries-old workings. He stood on the brink of one such

perilous pit, staring down, feeling the south-west sea breeze, teetering dangerously on the brink . . .

And woke, aggrieved and disoriented, to find Collier tugging at his arm. He sat up, cracking his head on the tunnel roof. "All right, all right!" he muttered. "What's the panic?"

"Listen," Collier said urgently.

Bentinck listened. Shovels, voices as before, but nearer now. Almost loud enough to distinguish words. Why didn't they shout hello? For that matter, why didn't he and Collier shout?

"Great," he said. "Much nearer."

"Not that," Collier said. "The other way."

Bentinck strained to hear. Nothing.

"Shove up towards the vault opening," Collier ordered. "I want to get by."

"Now what?" Bentinck grumbled. But he began backing off. He remembered his hard-hat and, going forwards again, collided with Collier. He sighed irritably.

The short crawl seemed to find every bruise he had sustained earlier, but he backed obediently into the vault passage. When Collier halted across the opening he felt an irrational bubble of anger at being bottled up that way. Move on or get back! he thought. He sighed loudly again.

"Shut up!" Collier said savagely.

Bewildered, Bentinck held his breath.

It was then that he heard the sound that Collier had picked up immediately. It was a moment or two before he could identify it.

Water. Pouring or falling. No—surging.

Still it didn't bother him. Even at this distance the comforting sound of work in the shaft was paramount. He waited patiently for Collier to explain. He made a wry face in the dark. "So?" he demanded at last.

Collier took his time. "I think the South Beach sea trap is open," he said.

This time Bentinck didn't need to rationalise before speaking. "We checked them," he said cheerfully. "No problem

there." In any case, he told himself, they'd be out in a short time. They might get their feet wet. But so what?

Nothing more was said for a few minutes. The water sound grew louder. But then so did the shaft noise. Bentinck was philosophical.

Collier had a different view. The South Beach traps had been checked. No way one, or even two tides –he struggled to recall how many—could have wasted the huge mounds covering the inlets out there. So, if they were opened now, then someone had taken the trouble to doze them open—even during the relatively short time they had been down here.

That much was logical. And the grim corollary was equally clear. But if someone did want to drown them down here, why the work in the shaft? He puzzled over it endlessly, distracted now by the way the water sound was almost as loud as the noises from the other direction.

In five minutes the water reached him. He was still on all fours, pointed towards the South Beach, hands out in front, senses straining, like a hunting dog. Cold water touched his fingers, drained into the sand, and then almost at once covered them. He switched on his helmet-lamp. The tunnel slanted right, or south-west, after about thirty yards. The light wouldn't reach all that way, but he could see that scummy water rippled one-inch deep over the uneven tunnel floor. As he watched, it surged again, covering his whole hand.

"Here it comes," Collier said. "Get up into the vault area."

Reluctant to move farther from the shaft, Bentinck backed right inside the passageway and began the backward climb. "Is it necessary?" he grumbled. "Really?"

Collier didn't answer. He didn't need to. Water surged along the tunnel six inches deep. At that volume it was gathering speed on the downward slope towards the shaft. Despite his own heavy breathing and Collier's, Bentinck heard it and was filled with new despair. In the space of their short exchange the tunnel floor had become a shallow but fast-flowing stream.

They both had their helmet-lights on. When he reached

the top of the slope, Collier looked around at the sandy floor. Sand wasn't much use as a damming material.

The gap in the vault wall offered a better one. And the vault itself might offer one way of staying alive, even if only for a short time. They could drop down inside, and for the space of one tide they might ride out the flood. If they did, the next would drown them, but by that time, hell, the shaft end might be open.

"Fingers crossed," Collier said, hoping Bentinck could see his grin.

Water raced on down, much deeper now; apart from an inward swirl at the passageway opening, nothing much was happening.

But in another minute or so the water began backing up from the closed shaft end. They knew the moment precisely. The rushing stopped. The level mounted swiftly, terrifyingly, to a point halfway up the slope.

Bentinck gulped, his helmet-light trained on the surge. Something odd was happening to the air pressure too. His ears felt strange.

"Probably close up to the roof at the shaft end now," Collier said. "But we'll get some remission when it finds its own level along the tunnel slope and behind that."

For a few minutes the water did just that. In the opening to the tunnel it sucked and then rose. And again. But when the level steadied it was substantially below the first tidemark.

They watched with a fearful fascination.

"It'll begin to creep up now," Collier warned. "And that's our steady worry—how far."

Bentinck sat down. "Got a cigarette?" He was winded by the speed of the assault. He took one of Collier's cigarettes and a light. "Your idea about Bowman. That doesn't seem quite so crazy now," he said calmly.

"Yeah," Collier said.

"I'll kill the bastard."

"Kill the plural bastards," Collier said grimly. "I doubt that Bowman bulldozed the sand off the inlets all by himself."

"A point," Bentinck conceded. It was odd, but here he was discussing their own attempted murder in nicely chosen language. He seemed to be over the hump of his fear. And Collier seemed to have none at all.

Over the next thirty minutes the water level rose slowly but steadily. It reached the top of the slope, sank once into the sandy floor, covered it by an inch, two inches, then six inches.

Bentinck lifted himself into a crouch gloomily. The first tunnel flooding had to be the result of the slow, returning tide. But tides stayed at the full for a time, didn't they? And for all of that period, whatever it was, the inlets would be taking in water. They couldn't expect anything but a steady rise. He began to think seriously about drowning. There was the vault, of course, but how long would it take to fill that, too? Meanwhile, there wasn't much hope that they would be reached from the shaft end. Work there would stop as soon as . . .

Collier laughed aloud. His helmet-lamp came round to Bentinck's face. "Godsake!" he shouted. "The shaft!"

"Will be no use to us," Bentinck said, "surely?"

"Why should they stop?" Collier demanded. "If they were working before, why not now?"

It seemed sense. "And?" Bentinck demanded.

"When they get down to the shaft floor, which can't be far off, the tunnel will blow in. It isn't solid. Not carefully corked, packed in, sealed. It's just spoil from a fall. The weight of water will blow it in . . ."

A fierce gulping sound echoed along the tunnel. Water smacked and swirled at the foot of the vault slope. The rushing sound resumed.

And the water level retreated down the slope as if someone had pulled a plug.

40

Bowman aligned the toes of his natty Italian shoes with the lip of the platform and looked down with grave displeasure on the swirling water now filling half the shaft. "All right," he demanded, his back to Wilkie, "what's the cause of this?"

Wilkie ran one hand through his hair, rubbing agitatedly at his scalp. "I don't get it. The traps are closed. They've got to be!" He sighed raggedly. "Could be another trap? Maybe the fall opened up another one. One we didn't find."

Bowman said nothing, his back a clear and rigid demand for something more convincing.

"Look," Wilkie argued, "the salt-marsh trap is sealed tight. No way that could have blown out. And South Beach has a goddam mountain of sand on every inlet. Collier and Bentinck checked that out themselves before they all went down. It should be in the log." He whirled on one of his men. "Fetch the log."

"Never mind the log!" Bowman said grimly. "Or the traps for that matter. That shaft is half full. The tunnel is full. The record may prove you right, looking at South Beach may prove you right, but it isn't going to help Collier, Ritson and Bentinck."

Wilkie came up to the platform and sank to his knees. He peered down into the shaft. "I gotta tell you, I don't think anything can help them. You're right. The tunnel is full. They probably never knew what hit—" he broke off, saw Brooks close at hand, listening, and yelled at once, "Somebody get Miss Remsen outta here and take care of her! Get her back to camp! Hey, you, come on, move for Chrissakes!"

Horrified that he had momentarily forgotten her, Bowman hurried off the platform, his arms held out to her. It was

doubtful Brooks saw him; at the same moment she had turned to run to the weather cabin.

There was nothing much in there: a folding chair, a shelf under the window, and a great many jackets and hard-hats, some on the few pegs, the rest on the floor. The log was kept on the shelf.

She snatched it up, turned to the last entry, and read it through a blur of tears. There it was, in Collier's looping scrawl: *South Beach inlets checked as secure*. He'd added the time and his initials.

She surrendered the book to one of Wilkie's men. What, then, had gone wrong? It was true that the first trap to blow, fed from the salt-marsh, had been deeply stopped at the shaft end. She had watched the operation herself, before the rest of the shaft was excavated. She'd seen it secured, seen the shoring strapped across the white cement scar. It had been done from the shaft end, Collier explained, because of the difficulty of making adequate checks on the salt-marsh inlets.

All right, so Nick and Alan and Jake—and Maureen—had been trapped by the South Beach sea trap. She wanted to go out there at once to see for herself.

Outside, Wilkie was shouting orders to get pump hoses into the shaft. There was more bustle about the drain off. The site was coming alive again now. Unused to the work, the *Hill* crew had nonetheless gone about their tasks on the double, seemingly shocked by what had happened and anxious to demonstrate their willingness to do anything at all that would be helpful.

Bowman had followed her. She sensed him in the doorway. Looking up she met his brown, unwinking gaze, found it kindly, and felt tears springing freely.

"I want you to come out with me to the *Hill*," he said softly. "There's nothing to be done here."

"No," she sobbed. She had just made up her mind what she wanted to do, though she had no idea how it might be done. But if she was right about Wilkie, she had to know as quickly as possible, before he got away with it. She still had no idea of his motive, but that, too, was something she had to establish. The difficulty was that Bowman would never agree

to her staying on Dirk's alone with Wilkie, the only other surviving member of the original team. Nor did she want to risk it.

But what if neither of them knew she was here? If she could contrive to stay concealed? Perhaps she could go with Bowman, now, and be seen to go—and then return somehow. The idea chilled her, filled her with dread, but she would do it if she could. For Alan, for Nick. And for Jake, of course.

Tears welled again. Bowman put an arm round her shoulders and she allowed herself to be steered towards the Jeep. In the gathering twilight a battery of hastily-rigged floodlights came on, restoring a kind of brilliant daylight to the small area around the shaft-head. On the platform, Wilkie stood alone like an actor waiting for the cameras to pick up speed. Beyond the lights the *Hill* crew, powerless to do anything further, were being mustered by Loftus. Patting her shoulder to hold her for a moment, Bowman strutted across to speak to them both. She watched apathetically, but the roar of two generator sets on a trial run drowned their exchange.

"Wilkie is going to run the pumps during the night," Bowman explained, returning. "When the tide turns, whatever the source of the water, it will offer a chance to get the thing dry. We'll see. We can't do much more in the dark, even with low tide. It would mean more light sets than we have to determine exactly what's open and what's closed. Anyway, we'll get the crew back here first thing."

"Should he be alone?" Brooks said innocently. She would have preferred that somebody stayed to watch Wilkie.

"Wilkie? He's tough," Bowman assured her. "They're used to it, these men."

Brooks barely heard him. How could she get to see South Beach and the inlets before the next high tide—and without Wilkie seeing her? Bowman handed her into the Jeep and she sat quietly beside him on the swift run to the launch.

On the way to the freighter, the launch knifing through a brisk, slate-coloured sea, she worried that Wilkie might successfully close the traps before she could get back. Was that possible? No—not unless he could find a way of erasing

the bulldozer's tracks. And if the tide had ebbed how would he smooth and shape the sandhills as the sea did?

They turned to come alongside. The sea slopped in the closing gap between the launch and the freighter. Spray caught her across the shoulders and she gasped at the chill of it. Only now did she realise she had brought nothing with her. No jacket, not even a sweater. Oh, great planning! she thought bitterly.

Handing her on to the accommodation-ladder, Bowman seemed to read her thoughts. "We have everything you'll need," he said. And to the steward waiting at the rail, "You will be responsible for seeing that Miss Remsen has everything she requires." He watched her follow the man forward.

The landing craft had just pulled out from Dirk's. The navigation lights gleamed brightly in the blue-black gloom that stretched all the way to the mainland, even though a melting arc of sky, water-melon red, hung for the moment above the now invisible sun in the west.

In the bright warmth of her stateroom, Brooks stripped off, showered and dressed again. The shoulder of her shirt was still wet. She rang for the steward and asked for a sweater. In a few moments he was back with one of the standard, damson *Hill* issue. It was too big, but she put it on gratefully, combed her hair, looked herself over in the mirror. How could that face look back at her unmarked, so far as she could see, by the loss of such men? Dry-eyed now, she stared back, acknowledging, unsurprised, a thread of steel in her nature. She could do nothing for them. But she could still see about Wilkie. If she could prove her suspicions even to herself—that would be a beginning.

She stood still suddenly, concentrating on the simple answer. She would take the launch. It was tied up on the starboard side, facing Dirk's. She would have to drift well clear of the *Hill* before she tried to start the launch's diesel, and she would have to approach Dirk's from the north, where the launch couldn't be seen. With luck the only watch would be on the bridge, facing south.

She allowed herself a small, stony smile. It sounded good. She didn't want to think about what she'd do if, having

drifted clear, she then found herself unable to start the launch. It would be in the half dark and she would be alone on a wild sea. She shivered, her mind's chamber of horrors projecting the nightmare of the astronaut who falls away into dark and limitless space.

Then there was Wilkie. If she was seen by him . . .

First she would eat something. She had shunned the food sent over by the freighter's galley staff. Now, with the new tension of what she intended, she was suddenly hungry and ashamed of it. But it made good sense to eat. She switched off the light, closed the door on the warmth and security that was all hers, and went to find Bowman.

41

Though she was hungry enough, Brooks would have preferred a hamburger and a cup of coffee served in her stateroom to the 'light supper' which Bowman had decreed.

A steward met her on her way forward and escorted her to the dining room. She found Bowman already seated and waiting. He sprang up at once solicitously and seated her on his left at the top of the long table, his manner an uncomfortable mixture of cheerful encouragement and delicate concern. She supposed the setting on Bowman's right to be Hillier's, but when Bowman had twice checked his watch without his appearing, a steward was sent in search of him.

Unpunctuality seemed to bother Bowman, even at a time like this. He indicated that the meal should begin and a cold Waterbury soup appeared first. Brooks swallowed a little, feeling guilty at taking part in such absurd formality, but Bowman set about his with enthusiasm. After a few moments Hillier appeared, his face set and inscrutable. He waived the soup, sat back with folded arms and seemed to have difficulty meeting Brooks's eye.

Stewards appeared with the next course: chicken breasts served on beds of pâté de foie gras with drawn butter and hearts of artichokes. Dismayed, Brooks fiddled with hers until Bowman, in a confessional voice, asked if she'd rather have something else. "It's important to eat something," he assured her.

"It's fine," Brooks said, choking. "And I'm fine, too. I'll be all right in a moment." She spoiled it by dropping huge tears on to the back of her hand.

"You'd rather be in your room—" Bowman suggested, dismayed. "Quite right. I should have had something sent to you there. I'm sorry."

"No!" she said urgently. "I prefer to be here, really. "I'll—go to bed in a while." It was important to be seen, now, and to leave in control of herself. Only then could she be reasonably certain of being undisturbed. If she withdrew in distress, Bowman would be sure to check for himself before he was content to leave her alone for the night.

Hillier cleared his throat. "What is the plan for the morning?"

Bowman frowned. Glancing at Brooks he said shortly, "Bring them up, if Wilkie has the shaft dry. That, and establish the cause of the accident. This is one that has no obvious cause. You've seen the log."

Hillier's eyebrows lifted in exaggerated surprise. "No obvious cause? The sea traps, surely . . ."

"The sea traps were closed," Bowman said firmly, "before the descent was begun. We must know what happened to change that. I'm not satisfied." He inclined his head apologetically at Brooks and added gruffly, "I'm sending two guards across tonight. Tomorrow morning I want everything just as it was tonight. Then we'll see."

Hillier puffed as if he could hardly believe his ears. "Guards?" he echoed. "What are they guarding? What could have caused the flooding—other than the sea traps?"

Swallowing a little of the rich food with difficulty, Brooks held her breath. She bent her head over her plate but watched Hillier covertly. Again he was exhibiting all the wrong reactions. The words were innocent enough, but the manner of

their utterance was too vehemently incredulous. Why didn't Bowman see that?

As if he had sensed the discordant note himself, Hillier applied himself to the chicken for a moment or two. "Very good, this. Valuable man, that chef." He breathed heavily down his nose, evincing a robust satisfaction. On a much more detached note, he said after a moment, "I still don't understand the guards. Something missing me? You don't mean that anyone would tamper with"—he shrugged the word off with amusement—"the evidence. Good heavens, there's only Wilkie on the island to do the tampering." He did a double-take, stopping short with a forkful of food halfway to his mouth and putting it down impressively. "You don't mean—that Wilkie—"

It was a ham performance, Brooks thought. She was quite sure now that Hillier and Wilkie were together responsible for whatever had happened on Dirk's. Bowman hadn't said anything of the kind. Only that there was a need to establish a cause of the accident and that the evidence needed to be there, untouched, on the following day. By jumping so swiftly to an assumption of Wilkie's complicity in what had happened, Hillier was both dangerously and suspiciously ahead of anyone else.

"Let's leave it, shall we, Borden?" Bowman touched Brooks's hand tenderly. "I'm sure this is painful for Brooks . . ."

"Of course, of course," Hillier said hastily. "Still, it's a shock, something like this."

Waving away the steward, Bowman poured more Pouilly-fuissé for Brooks in spite of her protests. "Help you sleep," he told her.

In a few more minutes she was free. As soon as Hillier was finished she stood up, smiled gratefully at Bowman and excused herself. "If you don't mind, Alex—"

Bowman satisfied himself that she was content to go to bed at once and took her as far as her door himself.

She sat on the bed for fifteen minutes and then took a short exploratory walk, her shoes in her hand. Overhead lights on all the decks comprising the superstructure made the first

few yards the least negotiable. There were fewer lights and longer shadows aft and the rail at the head of the accommodation-ladder was in total darkness. She moved towards it cautiously but there was no one on deck, the only activity being centred forward in the crew and guest quarters.

She looked down. The launch was still there, riding gently alongside. There had hardly been time for the guards to have gone across already, so maybe they were eating first. They might not be long, all the same.

There was no room for doubt. She had to act now. If she could somehow be taken across by the guards it would be a lot safer than trying to navigate the launch herself. Hiding, staying hidden, might be more difficult, but anything was better than the nightmare of a lone crossing in the dark. She trod swiftly down the accommodation-ladder.

The launch was sleek and commodious, but at first seemed to offer no hiding place. The polished fore-deck broke to a broad, segmented, wrap-around wheelhouse. It would be possible to lie down flat forward, immediately below the windscreen, but that would mean discovery on arrival. The well, then? Nothing obvious there, either. The wheel-man's chair was up two steps. Below it, the door to the engine compartment. That might be too dangerous a ride, especially if the sea was running rough. From midships to the stern a broad upholstered bench ran port and starboard into a tiny, planked stern area. The stern locker? She looked cautiously, checking, then opened it easily. Heavy-duty lines, a small anchor, a mess of hand fishing-lines; the whole area was fairly full.

She looked around in desperation.

There were lockers under the benching. On the port side there were cans, a funnel, tools, more heavy line.

She drew in her breath sharply, imagining she heard someone on the accommodation-ladder. A minute or two was lost, waiting in the shadow of the wheel-house area. When no one descended she tried the starboard locker. That was better; a wide, split door opened to a width of about four feet, albeit with a centre strut for the catches. It was relatively clear.

Pushing some line further along under the benches, she sat

down with her back to the opening and wriggled the top half of her body into it. By bending her knees up close she could negotiate the centre strut and stretch her leg into the other half. The only problem was the doors. She wriggled out again. This time she closed the rear door first, thrust her legs as far along as she could, then moved forward gingerly, level with the other half, pulling it closed by the catch.

It was dark, cramped and not entirely dry, but it was the ideal solution.

Like Bentinck in the tunnel, she reached forward and laid her head down awkwardly on her upper arm. There was plenty of air, and the slap of water along the launch's side would cover any minimal sound she made.

She settled down to wait for the crew.

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Collier eased himself down into a sitting position, his back against the end wall of the vault passage. It was painful to straighten his cramped legs. Bentinck did the same. With the retreat of the flood water they could again extend their legs forward.

"Well?" Bentinck said querulously.

Collier snorted. "We've got a reprieve. What else can I tell you?"

"Tell me anyway."

Collier took off his hard-hat and laid it down carefully. "The flood blew the shaft end of the tunnel just as soon as they'd cleared enough spoil. In other words, the trap operated just as it was designed to – anytime someone dug enough out near the mouth. Now the shaft is probably near to half full. That's where the water went and why we don't drown this time round. Okay?" He had barely had time to recover from

the tensions of the last few minutes and he didn't want to talk at all. He sounded peevish, he knew, and wanted to add a kindly word or two. In a moment . . .

"Oh great," Bentinck said. "What do we hope for now?"

"First," Collier said feelingly, "that some poor bastard didn't drown for us in the shaft." He drew a deep breath and added, in a gentler tone, "Next, we hope for the sound of pumps."

"Right." With rekindled hope, Bentinck felt calmer and he busied himself trying to visualise what would be happening around them in the interim. Obviously, the shaft couldn't overflow at the top. The flood would find a certain level along the whole tunnel, backing up as far as the inlets. So long as the shaft level remained steady the water in the tunnel, too, would be stabilised overall.

The helmet-lights were off again at Collier's insistence. He could almost sense Bentinck's fear and frustration and he sympathised, but they might yet need the remaining life in the batteries. He knew, too, that Bentinck was holding back further questions, determined not to be a burden, and he was grateful for that. For one thing he didn't know the answers, hadn't yet arranged in his mind who or what had triggered the sequence of events which imprisoned them. Until he had made some sense of it, Bentinck might be better off not asking.

In the dark it was impossible to see the Englishman. At least he was quiet and calm. That was something. In fact, Bentinck had been quite impressively controlled and Collier marvelled over it. Who would have thought that the sycophant who had attended Bowman like a gentleman-in-waiting would have it in him to sit there now, patiently waiting for the next assault on his life?

Because that's what all this had been: attempted murder. Collier was sure of that. Someone had to have opened the South Beach traps which he and Bentinck had carefully checked. Right. Next, someone had attempted to reach them by clearing the shaft and trying to re-open the tunnel. Murder and rescue within the same period of hours; how could that

make sense? Where was Jake Ritson through all this? And Brooks—was she safe? The impossibility of knowing was a deadweight which crippled initiative and inhibited rational thought.

The darkness and the silence were so complete it was becoming hard to focus his senses. Without the discomfort of their cramped position, and the bite of the rugged floor on their flesh, they might be afloat in a timeless, weightless void. He fought back fiercely against anxiety and despair.

At one moment he thought he'd uttered a sob of helpless rage, and turned his head to see whether Bentinck reacted. Nothing. He seemed to be sleeping. Again Collier was grateful and this time he felt a surge of affection for his companion. However he'd begun, the general's boy had proved to be wholly surprising. He would have liked to say something encouraging now, but decided against it. In their shared trial, he realised, they had somehow become supersensitive to each other's state of mind.

Collier tried concentrating on Ritson. If Jake had survived, he was doing whatever he could to get them out. He felt sure that Ritson at least was without blame. He was a hard man, but straight. Okay, then, what was he doing? Could it have been Jake who organised the shaft diggers? He could have drawn men from the *Hill*—always provided, of course, that Bowman himself was trustworthy. He couldn't be sure of that. On the other hand, *someone* had been digging in the shaft until the tunnel blew in.

It had to be Jake.

And if that was Jake, what about Wilkie? Was it he who uncovered the South Beach traps?

If so, how had Wilkie covered himself? One more of those accidents which happened on Dirk's? That might fool Bowman, but not Jake, surely.

And yet some such explanation was the only thing that made any sense at all. First a drowning, then a rescue.

And now? He flicked his lighter and looked at his watch. Nearly eight in the evening

Bentinck stirred as if coming awake and for his benefit Collier yawned elaborately.

"I reckon," he said, "that sometime soon we'll hear the pumps go in." He took the drama out of this by reaching out to touch Bentinck with his pack of cigarettes. "Here . . ."

Bentinck found a cigarette. While he bent towards Collier's lighter he stared curiously at the other man but could tell nothing from his expression. The ends of their cigarettes described glowing arcs in the darkness.

"How do you figure that?" Bentinck said. He shuffled himself into a different position to ease his aching rump.

Collier smiled at the spurious nonchalance in Bentinck's voice. "I reason that whoever is up there was trying to get us out when the water hit. Right? Well, sooner or later they've got to get us out."

"They won't be in any hurry," Bentinck said gloomily. "They won't be expecting to find us alive."

Collier winced. "True," he said. "Even so, we can't be left down here. Even if Bowman and Wilkie and Jake were all in it together—they've still got to get us out before the archaeologists arrive. They've got to produce the bodies and explain that there was this further, terrible, inexplicable accident. The decencies, right?"

"Right," Bentinck said, cheered.

"So they've got to pump out."

"First closing the South Beach inlets?"

Collier had been going to agree, but he suddenly saw this was wrong. "No."

"No?"

"What happens when the tide ebbs, Nick?"

"That's right!" Bentinck sat up, drew his last from the cigarette and flipped it away down the slope. "They could start any time."

"Are they going to be surprised," Collier said grimly. He wondered how Brooks would weather it all. First believing them dead, then finding them alive and angry.

It was nine before they heard the pumps. Collier sat up at once, reached out to alert Bentinck. Together they listened, confirmed it, chuckled in the dark.

"If they started right on the ebb," Collier said, "we could probably walk out in a few hours."

"How many hours?"

"Depends on how many pumps. That sounds like more than one."

"God," Bentinck breathed. "If we do, my friend, I want a cup of coffee, something to eat and then some fast, convincing talk from somebody up there."

The pumps droned steadily for two hours. Bentinck checked his watch in the light of his helmet-lamp and then directed the beam down the slope. There was little change.

"Give it time," Collier said wearily. "It's a hell of a big shaft and nothing back here changes until they break the back of it there first.

Bentinck groaned and lay face down. Time seemed to be slowing up. The hours he had spent underground seemed like days. Another two hours from now seemed a lifetime away.

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Oblivious of the guards, the pumps and the shaft, Wilkie lay flat on his back on the platform, in trouble with his breathing and with the sharp constricting pain in his chest.

Finding the Remsen kid sitting there asleep in the shadow of the crane had hit him hard. Worse than imagining that Jake Ritson was alive and well and up there on the dunes, coming after him. He took long, deep breaths trying to get his nerves under control. Only once before had he felt as bad as this, and that was down in Waco in '69, that time he'd fallen off the big Krupp bucket-wheel excavator. They stuck a few plasters on him, taped up his ribs and ran him back to his motel, and there was Fran in bed with this big trucker she'd brought home after her breakfast shift. Even with his ribs taped up, he'd been able to mess the guy up so his brother wouldn't know him; Fran, too. But it didn't make it

good. He remembered the chest pain vividly now, standing there for a minute with the door still open. Them lying there like that. Christ, *even Fran*! He'd almost loved Fran. Been good to her. They had put him in the county jail for what he'd done to them . . .

And now this Remsen thing. He'd walked across to the diesel truck, picking his way through the litter of drums, cans and junk there and put out a hand to the crawler to ease himself by. He'd looked down—and there she was. For a second he thought she was dead. Then he saw she was breathing gently, her lips apart.

It had really spooked him. In his confusion he forgot the diesel and turned right back, glad that the generator noise was covering his retreat to the platform.

Gradually his breathing returned to normal. Now all he had to do was try to make some sense of it.

She *knew*, of course. Or thought she did. That was why she had been sitting around earlier, just staring at him like that. Staring and looking for a sign that she was right. He'd sensed it at the time and he had been right.

But she couldn't *know*. If she had anything but guesses she'd have been to Bowman and he would have come back on the island with the whole crew, maybe even the mainland police. So that was all right. She knew nothing. Just wanted to be able to stick him with something. Well, that was all right, too. There was a lot of night left and he would find a way of solving her problems for her. It was going to be dark for a long time yet and the two creeps from the *Hill* were sacked down comfortably. It was possible. More than that; it was necessary.

One thing bothered him. How had she got here? The last he'd seen of her she was going off with Bowman in the launch. Christ, he'd *seen* her go. Seen that hair, blowing back as the launch took them out there. Now here she was back again and spying on him.

Not with Bowman's knowledge; that was sure For one thing he'd never have let her risk it if he'd known what she was up to. And if he didn't know, how could she have made it across?

As far as he knew there was only one launch. Right, so if she'd come in that she'd come with the guards. Okay? Okay. Then why hadn't they arrived together, spoken together? Somehow he felt sure the guards were equally unaware that she was here on Dirk's. Hell, they had to be; if they did know, it would be their responsibility to take her right back to Bowman. They might not be so tough, but Bowman didn't employ dumb people. They would know automatically what Bowman would want.

Okay, so the guards didn't know. Which meant she had either come across with them and they supposed she had taken the launch right back, or she had come along for the ride without their knowledge. He didn't think much of the first explanation; a girl like that, handling a launch at sea at night. No, that was out.

He got up, feeling much better, and remembered to act naturally, peering down the hole, kicking the hoses, giving himself a scratch. As he moved about he looked across to the crane, but the light was too bad. There was no way of telling whether she was still there or not.

So what was he going to do about her? If he was right, that no one knew she was here, it made a difference, didn't it? All the difference in the world!

Wilkie turned his back on the platform and walked down to watch the pump hoses gushing. "Brooks?" he muttered innocently and acting it out. He threw in a shrug. "On the *Hill*. She went back last night with the General."

And then, "Missing?" He practised one of his hokey expressions; the dumb, good guy struggling to make sense of it all. "Jesus! That's all we need. Another goddam mystery. Open the cage, I want out!"

Pleased with this rehearsal, he turned back, poured himself some coffee, gulping it down hot and black, and took the other vacuum flask into the cabin. He kicked the feet of the kid called Shad. "Hey, you mothers. Wake up for Chrissakes." He dropped the flask into the kid's lap, judging it nicely. The kid yelped and swore, rubbing himself.

"Get lost, Fatso," the other one said, yawning. "I got to get some sleep."

"Thought you'd like some coffee to help you stay alert," Wilkie said amiably. "Some guard you turned out to be." He went out laughing.

In the morning, if he didn't say anything about them sleeping the night away, they sure as hell wouldn't. ("The guards? Sure, they were around.") What could he have done with two guys watching him all night? They were going to be a real help.

He acknowledged his weariness now. He'd been on his feet all day and half the goddam night. And he'd taken care of Hillier's little problem. By morning he'd have earned every cent of his money.

Only the girl now. She couldn't sit there all night. He'd take a closer look in a minute. If she was still there she had to move sometime. And when she did . . .

He felt no real resentment towards Brooks. She wasn't his type of woman at all. A bit too thin and small in the ass for his taste. But she'd seemed like a nice enough kid. A pity she had to go, in a way. But he wasn't going to leave Hillier any room to renege. He was getting paid for a clean sweep and that's what he'd deliver. By now they should be accustomed to the idea of what had happened in the shaft and the tunnel. And when they dug everybody out, well, hell, the crew of the *Hill* had no idea what they were doing. The causes of the fall in the shaft were going to remain just another Dirk's mystery. As for the girl, nobody was going to be able to tell what happened there, either. All they'd have would be another body, drowned, last seen aboard the *Hill*.

He heard her then. She must have tripped or something. Even over the diesels he heard the little gasp.

He walked away from the sound, as if towards the hose ends. From there he'd move along the dunes in the dark

The chest pain returned again, but this time he found he could relieve it by taking big breaths and holding on to them, forcing them down into his lungs.

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Brooks became conscious of the drone of the pumps and realised that she must have nodded into sleep.

Suddenly frightened—sure that Wilkie must be looming towards her or that she had somehow given herself away she pulled herself into a seated position. Immediately, she saw there was no need for panic. Wilkie sat immobile under the floodlights of the platform, his legs dangling into the shaft.

A stiff breeze from the sea made her shiver, and it forced her further into wakefulness. The breeze began to lift fine sand, throwing it in stinging gusts across the site. She brushed it from her cheek, felt it in her still damp hair and then shielded the left side of her face with her hand. She remained watching, but nothing happened. Yet this time she remained alert. Sleeping, coming round, fearful, not sure what was happening, had provided enough of a fright for her to know she must stay awake this time.

She wished she had a watch with her. It was still on the dressing table in her stateroom aboard the *Hill*. That was a mistake. Earlier, after taking up this position inside the shadow of the crane, she had guessed the time as about ten But even then she had known she could be up to an hour out. And since then she had dozed for what could have been anything from five minutes to over an hour.

The journey to Dirk's, as a stowaway, had been without incident. After arriving at Falla Beach she had waited long after the guards had left before slipping over the side and making her way into camp. There, she had changed into warmer clothes and had found a flashlight which she had used, seconds at a time, to get to the track at the end of the street.

From that point on she had managed without any light—it would have been too dangerous. Finally, at the site, she had settled in the shadow of the crawler crane.

Since that moment—apart from the doze—her eyes had hardly left Wilkie. The guards, she saw, had arrived and taken refuge in the weather cabin. No doubt encouraged by Wilkie, they did not seem to be regarding their job as anything more than routine.

Early on she had decided that if Wilkie tried to close the traps, if he moved the bulldozer, she would alert the guards. At a pinch they might take orders from her, fearing a backlash from Bowman later. It was too late for them to do anything about her being there. If they tried to take her back she could probably talk them down. Meanwhile, perhaps it was better that they were out of the way. If Wilkie thought they were, too, he might be more likely to attempt a cover-up.

From her position, now, well inside the shadow of the crane, her eyes had followed Wilkie constantly, checking every move he made, disappointed that he never once so much as glanced in the direction of the bulldozer.

Her puzzlement had grown. It seemed logical that the one thing he must do was cover the traps, at least partly. They should have been closed and they hadn't been. Now as long as they remained uncovered they were some sort of indictment, surely? And yet Bowman, a man in whom suspicion worked as naturally as the instinct to eat or breathe, had not made the same assumption. Why not?

The door to the weather cabin remained open. There was no light in there, but the brilliance of the platform floods probably gave them enough light to move around. Once in a while one of the two young men would appear at the door and stand for a few moments watching Wilkie. It was the same one each time, she noticed. The other was probably already asleep.

As time went by, Wilkie's dedication to the pumps began to erode her conviction about him. At one point the nearer pump faltered and began to run only raggedly. Wilkie promptly stopped it, fiddled with it, and within five minutes had restored it to full power. He did nothing either odd or

remarkable. Just stood there, watching, waiting, occasionally directing a flashlight down the shaft to check the water level.

She even began to wonder if she could have got it wrong. Sadly, she acknowledged that she might have. She had been overwrought, grief-stricken, and trying to function normally just the same. She *could* have taken a wrong turning. She studied Wilkie intently now, as if signs of guilt or innocence would show on him in any unguarded moment.

At last it became clear he wasn't going to attempt to cover the South Beach inlets. Possibly because the guards would prevent it, or report it. Or because he had no need. Trying to think as Wilkie might, she reluctantly acknowledged that if he really had engineered the fall in the shaft and opened the inlets, the worst move he could make would be an attempted cover-up. It would be easier to shrug off the opened inlets as the work of freak tides. He could suggest that Bentinck and Collier hadn't made an adequate check. Or he could stand off, professing bewilderment: the whole thing a mystery, the kind of thing that had happened to poor Durrant.

Tired and dispirited, she realised she had achieved nothing at all by sneaking across to Dirk's. She had lost both Alan and Nick. And poor Jake. And for all her anguish and anger there was to be no outlet, no balm of retribution, nothing.

The guards, lulled by the monotony of watching Wilkie by turns, had evidently given up. Neither now came even as far as the door.

She ought to move. Cold, stiff and cramped, she straightened up carefully, all her muscles protesting. Her mouth was dry and her throat grainy; the diesel fumes, perhaps. She looked back once at Wilkie, ruefully. She was more than half persuaded, now, that she had been wrong about him. In any case it was certain he intended nothing covert or he'd have begun his move by now.

She thought about the choices. She could go back to the cabins and her own bed. The appeal of that was enormous. Even if she didn't actually allow herself to sleep, she could at least lie down in some comfort.

It was as she moved out of the shadow of the crane and into the solid black of the night beyond the reach of the floodlights

that, her legs still stiff and unsteady, she stepped awkwardly into a deep, hardened rut and pitched breathlessly forward on to her outstretched hands.

She had the good sense to lie still. She was sure she couldn't be seen. Especially not from within the bright glare of the floodlights. But had she made a sound, involuntarily? She couldn't be sure.

In a moment she got up and hurried down the track. The idea of lying semi-conscious, vulnerable inside her cabin, suddenly seemed the height of stupidity. She wasn't *that* sure of Wilkie!

It would be possible to circle, out of Wilkie's reach, to the back of the weather cabin, wake the guards and shrug off her presence as a piece of foolishness, a silly impulse. She could even demand that one of them ferry her back to the *Hill*.

Instead she came gradually to a halt. Another idea had greater appeal.

She could walk out to South Beach. Armed with her flashlight she could go safely by way of the west coast. If she turned west now, less than halfway back to camp, it wouldn't be much further than if she walked due south, going back stealthily past the site, with the attendant dangers that entailed.

Once there she could see for herself the state of the inlets. She knew very well how the beach ought to look; as if a giant hand had built two strings of enormous sand-castles in concentric semi-circles.

That made sense. Pleased with the idea of doing something to justify the trouble she'd taken, she turned left abruptly and lengthened her stride. At least if she could witness the current state of the inlets she would have achieved something to offset Bowman's irritation when he had discovered her gone and been worried about her, and when she explained how she'd sneaked aboard the launch and hidden in a locker.

It took her fifteen minutes to cover the ground. From a high spot on that side of the island she could look directly across the waist of Dirk's. The lights of the *Mulberry Hill*, she saw with something like longing, rode peacefully on the indigo sea.

As she plodded up the dunes cresting the beach, she could see at once that the sandhills were not all as they should be.

The gently creaming surfline made sense of the beach for her. This was the westernmost tip—and possibly the best place to begin the check. There were some dark mounds, she saw, but their outlines, looking along the semi-circles, blurred together. She would have to go down and walk the length of them, possibly commit to memory some kind of numerical order and condition. The inshore sandhills seemed to be intact in three or four places. Elsewhere she would have to look very closely to see what, if anything, remained.

It would be slightly hazardous. Easy enough to turn an ankle in the cunningly devised rock-lined mouths—the more so if they were partly obscured.

Almost at once she realised she could do nothing much until dawn. The ragged line of the dunes now on her left cut off her view of the head of the beach. The wind, still driving sand in from the east, didn't help. She couldn't really see anything much at all.

Intensely weary, frustrated at knowing almost nothing she had set herself out to discover, she crouched in a deep scoop in the dune contour. She knew it was safe to sleep now, that she should sleep. But still she fought it, persuading herself that every change in the sky was an intimation that dawn was about to break. Nevertheless, she dozed.

A sound—no more than a rustle—startled her, had her bounding to her feet, her head turning, terror surging, all her instincts knowing something was very wrong.

The man was a huge shadow, and as she opened her mouth to scream into the wind, huge arms lifted her, and she was struggling for her life.

Ritson had been awake perhaps half an hour when he heard the scream. Painfully, he lifted his head, gazed around in the darkness, strained his ears to try to pinpoint the direction. It was not repeated, and he fell back, convinced the sound must have been a trick of the wind.

Despite that, it added to his disquiet. He had woken, not knowing where he was, every muscle aching, his head

pounding with pain at the slightest movement Since waking he had been trying to remember; it had been in vain—his last memory was the rubble pouring down the shaft. Beyond that, nothing. Even trying to think brought more pain, produced new beads of sweat upon his feverish forehead.

His head—a matted mess of congealed blood—frightened him when he made the first tentative fingertip exploration. He supposed it had happened in the fall. But how had he got here?

He had pulled himself upright once, taken a few paces, and knew very roughly where he was. But why had he come this way? A sense of evil enveloped him, and he thought he was on the brink of remembering. But it passed, leaving him shivering with fever and fear.

With increasing consciousness came the realisation that his body was a mass of insects. He dragged himself upright again, began brushing frantically, phobic in his fever

And then he heard the scream again. This time it was not choked off, but was followed by others. He located it, locked on to the position, and jerkily, like a screen Frankenstein's monster, he set off in its direction.

He moved at an even pace, disregarding paths, stumbling over objects in his way, steps exaggerated like those of a sleepwalker, face set firmly ahead. He reached the ruts, realised where he was, followed them, and came to a halt on the top of a dune.

The place, the exact place, seemed familiar, and again he felt as though he was on the point of remembering something. This time he did not even give it a chance. He was too concerned with the scene in front of him.

There were two people, a woman, ahead, running, screaming, a man behind. The woman had to be Maureen or Brooks; impossible to know from here. The man was easier. Only one man on the island was that size. Wilkie.

It flooded back then. Not all of it. But some. Wilkie had tried to kill him. What had happened at the shaft was not a fall. That had something to do with why he was here . . . But again it vanished.

As he watched, the woman fell, tried to pull herself up

again, but collapsed back with a shriek of pain as though injured.

No less mechanically than before, Ritson began his descent down the dune, the thudding in his head now keeping step with the strides of his feet.

Below, Wilkie had reached the woman, was lifting her, moving forwards with her. She tried to flail an uninjured leg, frantic to stop him, impede him. It was absurd. Ritson could see she was as powerless as a rag doll. She began throwing her head from side to side; the scream had turned into a dry rattle of panic.

Wilkie hefted her up in his grasp and began staggering with her towards the surf. She must have understood what he was trying to do because she found new strength to scream.

Ritson, still unseen, was only thirty feet away now. He stopped, raised his hands like a man about to call upon his God, and bellowed a loud, painful, wordless shriek.

Still holding the woman, Wilkie paused, turned his head and saw an obscene zombie of a man. As he watched, the figure began to move again, huge mechanical steps, hands outstretched, mouth mumbling meaningless obscenities.

Ritson! It *had* been him on the dunes! He wasn't dead. Christ, he soon would be.

Wilkie lifted the woman, threw her away, heard her scream again as she hit the gravelly sand of the shallow water. He would deal with her afterwards. She was not going anywhere. She was hurt, couldn't walk; he could tell that.

He turned back, expecting Ritson to have begun to rush him. But the man was still moving slowly, not altering his stance or his even pace as he entered the sea.

Wilkie prepared to meet him. He had no fears—he could take Ritson in peak condition. As for this wreck . . .

The first and the last rules of fighting are to survive. In a fight to the death, you try to kill your opponent, no matter what it takes. But you do so in order that you may live.

Ritson had torn up those basic rules, but it was several minutes before Wilkie realised—and then it was too late. Much too late.

Ritson came onwards with the same even but jerky movement, making no attempt to defend himself. Wilkie began to smile as he prepared to hit. A sucker. The man was punch drunk after the fall, a standing target. It would be over in moments.

He felt no warning of what Ritson really intended when the other took the blow, stumbled, but kept coming, wrapping his arms around Wilkie like a drunk.

He did not even feel a flicker of fear when Ritson kept going, not struggling to resist when Wilkie began forcing his head down into the water.

Even in those early seconds when Ritson seemed to be co-operating in his own murder he did not suspect that the man was not interested in surviving—only in dragging Wilkie to death with him.

The first stab of panic came when he realised that Ritson's arms and legs had wrapped around him like vines. The man's weight dragged Wilkie's own body down into the water. At last he realised that far from fighting back Ritson was letting himself be drowned. It was like being tied to a massive rock that sank deeper and deeper . . .

Wilkie began a desperate battle to free himself. But it was useless. He died cursing the unfairness of it all.

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"All right," Collier said, "we can get started. First, though, we run through it once more. We don't know who's up there or what they intended. So we trust no one. We go quietly. No talking in the shaft or on the surface until we're clear of the site. No helmets, no lights. We find Brooks first—on her own, if that's possible. Watch me as I go up, because I'll be feeling the way up the shoring. When I hit the platform I'll get under

cover fast. Judge your own moment to come over the edge. Don't, for Christ's sake, trip or fall. Don't move until you're sure you can make it. Okay?"

"Understood," Bentinck said grimly.

They had been squatting at the foot of the vault passage for more than thirty minutes, watching the water level. The rate of fall seemed suddenly to have accelerated, though the pumps maintained the same, steady beat. The water was now under a foot deep in the tunnel. Allowing for the slope it might be no more than knee high in the shaft.

They couldn't wait much longer. As soon as the pumps found nothing to work on, someone might be down to take a look. And they would have lost the initiative.

Collier moved off. The going was soft, the tunnel floor carpeted with silt. And almost at once it was clear that the shaft showed some sort of diffused light.

Cold, wet and hungry, Bentinck saw it and marvelled that he felt no great relief. Whoever had created the fall and opened the inlets was still up there, content that they were dead.

Collier vanished in the gloom. A moment later, Bentinck, too, stood upright and stretched luxuriously. A dazzling white light showed at the top of the shaft, but there was no sign of activity. One giant step closer to Wendy, he thought, trying to warm himself with the thought, but all he could feel was anticlimax.

Light from the surface bounced off the first fifty feet or so of shoring, but it was dark down here. The water slopped around his calves. Collier was already reaching up, ready to climb.

In the event the climb wasn't too terrible. The shoring was good and held firm. He saw no sign of any disturbance on the way up, either. So much for an accidental fall.

He clung grimly to the strapping while Collier peered over the lip, took the last step up and rolled neatly on to the platform.

A wait for Collier to get clear . . . Now!

What struck him first was the harsh floodlighting. Anywhere at all away from that seemed sensible. But where was

Collier? He saw a movement, followed it blindly, taking long steps, putting his feet down carefully to diminish the squelching sound of his boots. Collier grabbed his arm and pulled him into the shadow of the crawler crane. From there he looked back, for the first time focusing on the scene.

The site was deserted. Hoses snaked away towards the salt-marsh. The pumps still thrummed. The lights burned. But there was no other movement.

Bentinck sat down, pulled his boots off in turn and emptied them of water. He felt the pressure of Collier's hand, urging him to stay put and watched, open-mouthed, as Collier trod softly over to the open door of the weather cabin.

He held his breath, counting the seconds. The wind off the sea tugged at his wet clothes, setting up a shuddering he couldn't control. At last Collier reappeared.

Trudging along the track to the camp, Collier muttered that two of Bowman's crew were asleep in the weather cabin. Bentinck heard, trying to see the significance of it, but he was on the edge now, uncaring, no longer braced by anxiety about Collier's opinion of him. The pitch dark fretted at his nerves and he felt more hunted than hunter. Amid the rigours of the vault passage he had assumed any place on the surface of Dirk's must be an improvement. The camp, as they approached, changed his mind. Without a light it was as if they were back underground, this time unable to see what threatened. He desperately wanted to be somewhere warm until daylight when he could see and judge risks for himself.

Exhausted, reluctant, he followed doggedly in Collier's footsteps, checking the buildings and cabins one by one. In Brooks's cabin they found a *Hull* sweater and Levi's, both sodden, on the sill of the shower. But no Brooks and no Maureen. "Tells us nothing," Collier said. "Bowman would never have let them stay the night here without lights and facilities."

At last they moved towards the beach. They'd seen the launch on their way up, beached and secured.

Bentinck slid over its side and now lay huddled on the starboard bench. He heard Collier straining to get the launch

into the water, and with the last ounce of his reserves climbed out to help. But he could do nothing else, he thought. They'd squeezed him out. He felt the deeper chill as they headed into the wind, but lay numb and apathetic. The shuddering had stopped. He felt he was losing consciousness. His mind absorbed the throb of the motor, found it hypnotic, let it drag him down into sleep. After a while he was no longer aware of the cold, his hunger, or even where they were going.

Later, he could never remember reaching the freighter, being taken aboard, or Collier's whispered demand to Loftus that Bowman, and only Bowman, should be fetched immediately.

His recall began in the warmth of a small cabin. He was wedged in a bulkhead corner, sitting up on someone's bunk, wearing a blanket and sipping scalding coffee. The shuddering had begun again, so violently that he was spilling the coffee everywhere. Collier, also wrapped in a blanket, sat in the only chair.

After a time, Bowman appeared. Bentinck giggled. It struck him as amusing that, even at this hour, Bowman should appear parade-ground fresh in a heavy sweater, tracksuit pants and rope-soled shoes. Surely he hadn't shaved in the middle of the night? But there it was. Bentinck beamed owlishly, slopping more of the coffee.

"This is tremendous," Bowman said. He stared at them both, brown eyes unblinking. "How did you stay alive?"

"What the fuck do you care?" Collier snapped. "Where's Brooks?"

"In her stateroom, asleep." Bowman looked puzzled. "Why were you anxious?"

"She's here?" Collier insisted.

"I've just said so." Bowman frowned at Collier's evident relief. He looked at them in turn critically. "I think it would be simpler," he said kindly, "if you told me just what's been happening to you. Why the secrecy, the trip here in your condition? Why didn't you let one of my men bring you? And where's Ritson?"

Collier sagged, the fight going out of him. The relief of knowing that Brooks was safe drove everything else from

his mind for the moment. He fastened on it, grateful that Bowman hadn't left her within Wilkie's reach. He shook his head, bewildered. Was that right? It was by no means clear what danger Brooks might have been in from Wilkie, since neither he nor Bentinck had any real idea about the man's motivation.

Anger at Bowman flared. His voice rose to a ragged shout: "Godsake, man, sooner or later everyone connected with this thing is going to end up dead at the bottom of that shaft. How the hell do you account for it? And what the fuck are you doing about it?" Oddly, he realised he no longer had any suspicion about Bowman himself. Or real anger either. What he felt was more like exasperation. This man wasn't so much corrupt or criminal as reckless and incompetent. A dangerous clown.

Bowman's composure still held. He patted Collier on the shoulder and turned to include Bentinck in a glance of apparent distress. "You must believe that I never intended any of you to run this kind of risk or pay this kind of price."

Collier wasn't too sure that the distress was genuine in the sense that the man actually felt anything. Perhaps it was enough that he knew he ought to be distressed and show it. From Bowman that was really something. No word Collier had ever heard him speak suggested the man was capable of even this much humility.

"Sure," he said wearily. "You're sorry. That makes everything just fine."

Bowman sat down on the edge of the bunk and leaned forwards, rubbing the bridge of his nose nervously. "I have to tell you that Miss Keyes died in the shaft. Her body was discovered just before the flooding. She must have been caught in the fall. We're still looking for Ritson."

Collier at once glanced at Bentinck. Almost no reaction at all. Then he stared at Bowman a long time until it seemed that the cabin darkened and the man on the bunk had receded into the middle distance, as through the wrong end of a telescope. He waded briefly in unreality, absorbing Keyes's death, finding that he, too, was hardened now, felt little more than regret. What was that Bowman had said?

He remembered and jerked back angrily. "There you go again," he yelled. "What goddam fall was that then? There was no fall. The shaft is intact. We were buried down there by spoil. Deliberately locked in, set up ready for the water trap. What kind of people you got on this thing anyway—psychos?"

Bowman flinched. He thrust his face close to Collier's, speaking urgently. "I understand your agitation, but it doesn't help us to find out what's happening. I think I made the same deductions as your own as soon as I arrived back on the island. Where do *you* put the blame?"

"Wilkie," Collier said at once. "It has to be Wilkie." He gestured irritably at Bentinck. "Will you take that coffee off him? He's got more of it on him than in him."

Bowman rescued the cup and set it on the floor. "But Wilkie is only a tool, an agent. You see that?"

"Sure," Collier agreed. "But who put him up to it?"

"I think we'll find it was Santander. And that's something I want to handle myself." He stood up and paced a little. "It must be obvious why. Santander hoped to acquire Dirk's by default before any announcement could be made. These last few days have shown they had everything to gain—the only problem being that, in order to activate their own lease, it would first be necessary to get rid of everyone who had seen the vault. Time was running out. The first team of archaeologists assembles in Halifax the day after tomorrow. And the announcement will be made immediately they have authenticated the first handful of artefacts. That done, the BBMC lease is renewable, obviously. If Santander could have cleared everyone on the island they would have had only one more hurdle to overcome."

Dimly, Collier digested this. "What was that?"

"Myself, of course," Bowman said wryly.

It was a moment or two before Collier got the point. He roused himself from a welter of conflicting ideas and feelings. He snorted. "How the hell was Wilkie planning to stick it to you, for Christ's sake? Sink the *Mulberry Hill*, riding a one-man submarine?"

Bowman smiled. "Think . . ."

Collier thought. "Okay, okay. More than one Wilkie. It's a lot of money. You could buy an army with it, right?"

Bentinck stirred, rearranging his arms and legs. Leaning dangerously out of the bunk, he tried to catch Bowman's eye. "What a lot of trouble we'd all have been saved," he said nastily, "if they'd started with you."

Collier bounded up, laughing hysterically, ruffling Bentinck's wispy hair, punching him. "Godsake, I thought you were going to be a wheelchair case."

"I am," Bentinck giggled. "But not until I collect from the old Generalissimo here."

Astonishingly, Bowman smirked. He filled his lungs, squaring his shoulders. "I think Loftus should fetch Brooks," he said briskly. "It would be unfair to keep the news of your survival from her any longer." He pressed a bell by the side of the bunk. While they waited for a response, he warned, "When you've had some sleep we'll deal with Wilkie, of course, but I want to do it so that Santander, the real villains, come unstuck at the same time. Agreed?"

"We agree," Collier yawned.

There was a tap at the door. Bowman opened it three inches and had a low-voiced exchange with someone.

Then Loftus came to the door and held a muttered conversation with Bowman.

"Rubbish," Bowman snapped. His voice rose to an agitated snarl. "Look again. Look in other rooms, look in all the rooms. Search the ship, but don't come back until you've found her."

He turned to Collier reassuringly. "Of course she's here. I brought her back myself last night."

He sounded positive enough, Collier thought. He should know. Right? Why then did he feel a first faint pulse of anxiety?

46

The disappearance of Brooks galvanised Bowman. Even Collier, despite his chilling fear for her safety and his own fatigue, was partly reassured by the man's abrupt transition to cool, omnipotent commander. The general moved about the freighter with tigerish zeal, talking, explaining, arranging. Clearly shaken by the failure to find Brooks on board, he nonetheless refused to recognise either the sullen hostility of both Collier and Bentinck or real cause for alarm.

By first light a landing party was ready. Eight men, under Loftus, waited in the launch as Bowman, Collier and Bentinck came aboard. Bowman at once climbed the step to the wheel and turned to address his troops gravely.

Six men would start searching the island the moment they landed. They were to report immediately anything at all which might shed light on what had become of Brooks Remsen. Bowman gave the order to move out and the launch surged north. He turned to Collier and laid a hand on his arm. "You'll trust me in this? It's important." When Collier, too full for words, shrugged helplessly, Bowman added, "For the moment I'd rather Wilkie didn't see you. Anyway, I need you with me."

From the top of the north cliffs, the six men, all in *Mulberry Hill* sweaters, fanned out east and west. The wind had dropped but there was as yet no warmth in the huge, orange sun as Bowman led the rest of the party down the track and into the camp.

In Brooks's cabin, Bowman demanded to see the clothes Collier had found. His mouth tightened as Bentinck held them up. "No point in concealing this from you," he said heavily. "This is what she was wearing when she came on board last night."

"Then she did come back here," Bentinck said triumphantly. "She may even have been here, somewhere, when we came through the camp." He was aware of trying to sound hopeful, though his instinct warned him differently.

"If she's here," Collier raged, "why the hell don't we get down to the site and save ourselves a lot of suffering?" His words were wasted. Bowman was already heading for the door with the two men who had remained with him.

"I'll go ahead," he ordered. "You two"—he pointed to Collier and Bentinck—"stay here. Follow me in fifteen minutes. Exactly. I can see if Brooks is there. I don't want Wilkie to see you two. Yet."

Collier began to follow, but Bentinck reached out, restrained him. "Give him his fifteen minutes," he said. "I'm as concerned for Brooks as you are. But if he's got a plan for getting Wilkie . . ."

His tone echoed what Collier had been trying not to think: that Brooks was dead, that vengeance was all that was left now. He did not say anything, but he did not move as Bowman closed the door behind him.

Outside, Bowman strode in the direction of the site, running through his plan in his mind. His main concern, of course, was Brooks. But, being practical, he could do nothing about what might already have happened. He could do something about finding out how much Wilkie knew.

His plan was a simple one. He would greet Wilkie at the site, but keep from him all news of the safety of Collier and Bentinck. Wilkie would be stunned enough simply at seeing him there.

Bowman would then insist that Wilkie went down the shaft to recover the men's bodies. During his absence below, Collier and Bentinck would arrive, would be waiting to confront the man when he re-emerged.

Now *that*, thought Bowman, should be a moment. And if Wilkie was ever going to be in a state to start talking, that should be the time.

There was just one problem when he arrived. Except for two sleeping guards, the site was deserted. Wilkie was gone.

It was then that Collier and Bentinck arrived in a Jeep. Collier was out of it before it stopped moving.

"You've got Wilkie somewhere safe?" he asked Bowman, scanning the site and seeing only the two guards. He had allowed the General a bare fifteen minutes.

"He's not here. No sign of him."

"Christ!" Collier erupted. He turned, caught Bentinck's eye. No need for either of them to say anything. It was obvious what they were both thinking. If Brooks and Wilkie were both missing . . .

Collier was already moving. "Godammit," he screamed. "Come on."

"Where?" Bentinck was already following.

"They've worked the north end; we'd have heard if they'd found anything; let's start at South Beach."

They screamed off, Collier driving, cursing as he crashed through the gears.

Bentinck leaned across, shouted in his ear. "She'll be all right. She's a tough cookie." The words had a hollow ring, but Collier nodded, acknowledging the other's attempt.

They met two of the searchers up in the pine scrub. The men waved them to a halt, and for one terrible moment Collier and Bentinck thought they had found a body. Brooks's.

It was not as bad, but it was enough to send them onwards with renewed fear. Blood. Large droplets of it, leading back to a shallow dip, where the ground was stained.

"It looks as though whoever it was walked away," said one of the men. Nevertheless, they had started scratching up the ground.

Collier and Bentinck left the Jeep, moved onwards on foot. Despite his attempt to reassure the other, Bentinck felt a sickening certainty that Brooks had to be dead. How could he, how could anyone, for a moment have supposed that Brooks, if she were alive, could have failed to see and respond to the launch, the searchers, the helicopter, the activity? He felt his insides twist in anguish. Brooks! Warmest and most unusual of women.

They moved side by side now, heads bowed, eyes scanning

the ground ahead, both expecting to stumble on her body, neither admitting it aloud.

They reached the dunes, looked down on the sand below Other searchers were already there. But it was the dozer that drew their attention. Suddenly, the whole story became obvious. Wilkie had opened the traps. Brooks, after smuggling herself ashore, had either followed him or stumbled upon him after following a hunch. Wilkie had seen her, chased her, caught her. Hence the blood.

But where were they now? With a shiver, Bentinck realised what he really meant was where was Wilkie. Brooks could be only one place—in the sea where Wilkie would have thrown her body.

He glanced sideways at Collier to see if he had come to the same conclusions, but the man's face was fixed, a mask of pent-up anger.

They saw one of the searchers wading from the sea as they began their descent of the dune. The man was yelling inaudible words, and even from here it was obvious he was carrying someone. Collier and Bentinck began to run, slithering in the sand. It was clear now that the body was a woman soaked hair hung long, one arm dangled free, pitifully thin and childlike.

As they neared, the man cleared the water, put down his bundle, and knelt beside it, his head going down towards the woman's face.

Others were there before them, but Collier and Bentinck elbowed through. The man, still on his knees, was leaning back, the mouth that had just paused from giving resuscitation split wide open in a grin of triumph and relief.

Beside him, laid out on her back, was Brooks, her skin pale, her fair hair dark with sand and sea-water. But her breast rose and fell with deep, even breaths. She was alive.

They did not find Ritson and Wilkie until seven hours later. By then Brooks was back on the *Hill*, in bed, sedated, her fractured ankle tied lightly on top of a small pile of pillows.

Bowman, Collier and Bentinck had waited on the beach,

mostly silent, as searchers probed the shore and the helicopter swooped overhead in low, deliberate, patterns.

It was the helicopter observer who spotted the first body; the searchers who swam out to drag it in who found the second nearby soon afterwards.

Rigor mortis had already begun in both men, and the upper parts of their bodies had stiffened, making them hard to handle.

They lay, stretched in the sand, the gash in Ritson's head soft and pink where it had been cleaned by the sea. Around Wilkie's eyes there were faint dot marks—a sight that puzzled Bentinck until a searcher who had seen bodies taken from the sea before explained. Fish, he said. Nibbling.

Bentinck turned away, but the image of the two bodies remained.

It was Bowman who took his arm, began to lead him away, solicitous in his touch, surprisingly tender in his words. "Poor devils," he said quietly. For the first time since Bentinck had met him, he appeared to be drained, heavy with human frailty.

Bentinck realised that on Bowman's other side Collier was being led away too.

At the top of the dunes they paused for a brief moment, turned, looked down on the scene. The bodies were being loaded into the Jeep.

"I suggest we go and see Brooks," said Bowman. The clipped, military voice was back. "After all, that's what matters."

He took two paces, stopped, turned to face both men.

"It's all over," he said. "You realise that. It's all over now."

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With Brooks safe, Wilkie exposed, and nothing to do but for Bowman to bring in his archaeologists and decide how best the news of the find should be broken, an air of relaxation descended on those who remained on the *Hill*.

After the events of the previous days it was a strange feeling—broken from time to time by memories, not least of Ritson. But in the main everyone felt good, a sense of well-being reinforced by the knowledge that this lull would be short.

Bowman and the doctor had insisted Brooks should stay aboard for at least 24 hours—she did not need hospitalisation, but she did need rest. Collier and Bentinck, who elected to stay with her, decided they were a little more cynical about Bowman's motives. They did not doubt his concern; at the same time, they suspected he wanted everyone who knew the full story to be under his eyes when the find was revealed.

Hillier also remained. There was one session when he and Bentinck spent nearly an hour reviewing the situation with Bowman—but it was the General who did almost all the talking, and Bentinck suspected he and Hillier were there only to provide an audience. Not for the first time he began to wonder about Hillier. The man had been with Bowman for a long time; his power was an open secret. His appearance had to be deceptive. Bentinck had never seen him other than dressed like some menswear ad. from the pages of a glossy. Last time he had appeared on the island he had been dressed as though he were arriving for pre-lunch cocktails, in grey slacks, blue blazer and silk cravat. His air of benevolence was always pompous, wholly counterfeit. A lightweight, you might think, a poseur, a man born with money playing at big

business. But, from the little Bentinck knew of the man's background, he realised that had to be wrong—Hillier had worked his way up, serving his time at a lot of levels and in a lot of places in the industry. What you saw now was the gloss that had been collected layer by layer over the years. It was a tough industry; to get where Hillier was you had to be pretty tough yourself.

Collier, too, was doing a great deal of thinking about Hillier. But it was much more specific. None of it was pleasant.

All of them had wondered about who had paid Wilkie, who was Santander. The general feeling was summed up by Bowman: it could be any one of a score—even a hundred—of rich men who had been sold Dirk's secret. Wilkie could have been approached via a whole chain of middle men. The chances of following it back were slender—even if Bowman wanted to try, and the tone in his voice said he did not.

Collier, though, did not quite buy it. He had a gut feeling it might all be much closer home than that. More specifically, he had doubts about Hillier. He had not voiced them to anyone—not even to Bentinck. They were too instinctive, too lacking in substance for that. Partly it was his sense of the frustration he would feel if he was in Hillier's shoes—the man was obviously a person of some talent whether you liked him or not (which Collier did not), but Bowman treated him like a pet animal. In his shoes Collier would burn with quiet resentment—would plot to get more of the action in his own hands. But even as he thought it, Collier realised he was seeing things from his viewpoint—Hillier might be one of those guys who didn't mind eating a shovelful of dirt occasionally in return for all the goodies that came his way.

The few specifics, too, were equally short on substance. There was, for example, Hillier's reactions when he had first seen that Collier and Bentinck were alive, not lying dead underground. He had clapped a hand to his head as if he might be suffering from delirium. "Well," Hillier had said, "heavens! You have survived, both of you. What a day. What news!" And again he had touched his fingertips to his forehead as if overcome.

The gestures and the words, Collier had noted, were those of an actor, devoid of any real feeling or conviction. To him, it had been a startling revelation, that had set him wondering whether others had noticed it too.

Now, though, slept, rested, happy in the knowledge Brooks was all right, that soon they'd be back in New York, he had to wonder whether he had not read too much into the scene—but at the same time his disquiet remained.

It returned now as he stood at the rail and watched the launch lowered. Hillier was going ashore. It had been discussed earlier. Hillier, surprisingly petulant at the news that they were all expected to remain a little longer before flying home, had announced he did not think he could bear another night aboard ship. Minutes later, he had seized on a suggestion—Collier could not even remember how it had developed—that he should go ashore, check that everything was perfectly all right before the forthcoming visits of whoever Bowman selected to see the find. Everyone else, it seemed, had leapt at the idea with equal enthusiasm, anxious to find a job where there was none. The thought of life without Hillier around even for a day, even for a few hours, was a pleasing one.

Watching the launch draw away from the ship, Collier felt a fresh stab of disquiet. Whatever everyone else thought, something told him that it was not all over yet. He left the rail reluctantly, looked into Brooks's cabin, found she was heavy in sleep. He had no better luck with Bentinck: he and Bowman were in session.

Finally, on a sudden, but strong impulse, he wrote Bentinck a brief but reassuring note, talked a crewman into helping him lower a dinghy over the side. Then, alone and unseen he set out to paddle towards Dirk's. He had no idea what Hillier planned to do—if anything. But he had to see.

The idea had grown in Hillier's mind through a long, sleepless night. He saw no way now to destroy all those who had seen the find—and, equally important, to escape himself. But if he could prevent anyone else—any outsider—from gazing

upon the vault and its contents, he believed that would be enough.

There had been no photographs; not even any items taken to the surface. If Hillier could seal the vault—temporarily, of course, until exploration rights passed from Bowman—it would be as though the find had never been. The only proof of its existence would be the words of Bowman, Brooks, Collier and Bentinck—all people with vested interests. After what had happened on the island and the disquiet already voiced in the Canadian press, he was certain Bowman would not have a hope of extending his lease. If nothing else, it would give him time.

Setting off from the *Hill*, the only passenger aboard the launch, he was conscious of Collier's eyes on him. He read no more into the gaze than interest—and dislike. The first was natural; the second was something he had long learned to live with. Many people disliked him; as long as they did not get in his way it was a state of affairs he could live with.

Stepping ashore, he sent the launch back to the ship, saying he would radio when he needed it. He had already alerted Bowman to the possibility he might stay overnight—the crew of the launch had noted with disguised amusement that in addition to a camera case he carried a small grip, which no doubt contained monogrammed pyjamas and a robe. They would have been less amused had they also known it contained a 7.65mm. Belgium FN pistol which he had bought in New York. The travelling alarm clock would have attracted less curiosity, but in reality it was no less sinister.

Hillier knew he had become the third man on the island. Bowman had placed an operator on 24 hour-standby in the radio shack; a second man was on guard at the site. Even those precautions had been seen as token.

Hillier's first stop was the radio hut, to stress he would be examining everything. That would forestall any suspicion—no matter where he went. He also made sure he was especially obnoxious. That should keep the man well out of his way.

His second call was to the now deserted main bunkhouse where he left his bag, the third to a heavily padlocked store,

isolated from the rest of the huts. He had to smash the lock, but by the time that was discovered it would not matter. Inside, he breathed in the sweet, marzipan-like smell, took three sticks and blasting caps. It was high velocity gelatin dynamite, designed for shifting rock.

There were timers, but he left those—none were long enough for his purpose. He placed the sticks inside an empty camera case he had brought along for the purpose. Then he continued his tour, making sure it took in other stores and workrooms that yielded the items he needed: a small drill, a tiny nail, glue, transparent Scotch tape.

In one hut he came across a transistor radio, and took that—it would yield wire and batteries.

Then, working nervously but unhurriedly, the items spread out on an empty desk top in a deserted corner office, he assembled his bomb. Of those on the *Hill*, only Bowman and Collier would not have been surprised by his expertise. Bowman because by reaching back into his memory he would have recalled the young Hillier; Collier because he knew that anyone who had been around mining for as long as Hillier had to know how to handle equipment -and that included explosive.

The bomb was the simplest, most rudimentary kind: the clock, with its finger hand torn off, provided the timing part of the mechanism. It would trigger the dynamite when the hour hand connected with the nail inserted through the plastic lens of the clock. The battery would detonate the dynamite cap. Scotch tape bound it all together.

It would detonate in four hours—a time at which Hillier planned to be well back on the ship, saying he had changed his mind about staying overnight. The guard, whom he planned to deal with after placing the explosive below, would be found down the shaft, the inference being that he had died after planting his short timer bomb. No one could find the clock mechanism until the tunnel was cleared, the vault reopened—but by that time there would be a new exploration company in command. Hillier doubted Santander would look too hard for anything!

The bomb, wrapped in a towel, joined the gun in the

camera bag. With it on his shoulder, he strolled out, for all the world like a tourist departing on a sight-seeing trip. On the way to the site, he moved cautiously. The dynamite should be stable, but its presence made him nervous, as it would any sensible man.

The guard at the site was mildly curious no more. He knew who Hillier was, of course; knew he was number two in the whole Bowman-Brace operation. But he wasn't a man you normally saw drifting about on his own.

Hillier made a token gesture to the camera case. "We need some pictures," he said, as though grudging the courtesy of making any explanation to a minion. "The General doesn't want any outsiders down there. I'll take them myself."

The guard opened his mouth to start protesting that his orders from Bowman were to let no one down the shaft.

Hillier's imperious words cut him off. "You'll let me down. I take it you can work the winch."

"Yeah. Sure." He turned to get started, thankful that Hillier had interrupted him, stopped him protesting. Hillier was no man to cross.

Minutes later Hillier was on his way down the shaft, an incongruous figure in too tight coveralls and a hard-hat. The guard shook his head in wonderment as the other disappeared.

Neither he nor Hillier had seen the island's fourth inhabitant, watching from the edge of the site. Collier.

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"Christ," said the guard, turning as Collier came into his sight. "Suddenly it's like Grand Central."

"Just winding up,' said Collier easily. "The General wants to be sure everything's okay. Hillier gone down yet to take his pictures?" His eyes had taken in the camera case.

"Maybe five minutes ago." The guard's voice still contained some wariness.

"Fuck. That's what happens—I stay behind a few extra minutes to check with the radio operator, and Hillier's too impatient to wait. General wouldn't be too happy if he knew. I'm supposed to look out for the man. Suppose I'd better get down fast."

The guard again opened his mouth to argue. But what the hell! First Hillier, then Collier. Orders couldn't apply to these two. And it explained why he'd felt uneasy about Hillier going down alone—he should have known someone like Collier would be there looking after him.

Collier had already fetched a hard-hat, and was ready.

The guard shrugged. "Next time maybe the General'll sell tickets," he said. But he moved over, began to let down the bucket. Before Collier's head disappeared, he shouted as an afterthought, "Anyone else?" The voice boomed back, "Just concentrate on bringing us back up."

Collier stared into the blackness, ready to swing out into the shaft as soon as the bucket reached bottom. He did not know whether Hillier could hear him coming down—he hoped not. He had purposely waited the length of time he thought would enable Hillier to get into the vault. He did not know what he would find Hillier doing. The vault, though, had to be his target.

He was wary, nervous even. Only a fool would not have been. He thought of how many deaths Hillier had been responsible for—even if he had murdered by remote control. But underground Collier was in his element. He knew he had the edge.

The dangerous moment would be the seconds either side of reaching the bottom: if Hillier had heard him coming, he was vulnerable—literally a sitting duck. He crouched in the bucket, nursing its protection, until it hit. Then he was up and over fast, pressed against the wall of the shaft until he was sure Hillier was not there.

He risked a brief flash of light to see whether the tunnel was clear, and then crawled forward in darkness.

He moved slowly, carefully, knowing that no one could

have made less noise. He stopped frequently, listened, sure now that Hillier had to be in the slope or the vault itself, but not wanting to be caught unawares if the other started back. Not that he thought Hillier would dare try to move without his light.

He was at the entrance to the slope now, had to risk another flash of light. Again, nothing. He started forward, his heart pounding. He reached the opening, paused, composed himself, steeled his body for movement. This, he knew, was the most dangerous moment of all. From here he could see no sign of light. Hillier could be waiting just inside, armed, ready to bring a weapon down on him as he entered.

Despite that, he carefully removed his hat—in getting through fast, it would be an impediment. That done, he reached out, located the edges of the gap with his fingertips, tried to position himself and then, before caution made him hesitate, he shot forward fast.

The hard-hat in his outstretched hands went through first, followed by his body, rigid like a swimmer in a dive. His right hip caught the side with a thud that left him sickened, but he was through, twisting so that he landed on his side, hands free now to break the impact.

The helmet clattered and knowing there was no hope now of keeping his presence secret, he kept rolling until he hit an obstruction. He crouched, ears straining, and then the light caught him full on, illuminating him like an aircraft in a searchlight.

"If you make the slightest move," said Hillier, "I have a gun trained on you, and I will shoot you dead."

The light was low, and it took Collier a while to work out that it was hand held, and not the lamp on Hillier's hard-hat. Behind it, the man himself was invisible. Then, to prove his words, Hillier held his other hand out into the beam. The shape of the pistol was unmistakable.

"You'd never fire it down here. You'd bring the roof in."

"Would I?" The voice, so effete, had a frightening hint of quiet hysteria. "I'd say this roof has been up far too long for one shot to make it cave in. Still, we'd see, wouldn't we."

Collier tried to imagine the man's face; was it trying as hard to be composed as was his voice? He had never seen Hillier under pressure; how well would the man cope?

"I had a feeling someone might follow me. Funny, I half thought it might be Bowman himself. He suspects me, doesn't he? Did he send you? When I heard the bucket come down, I hoped he might have come himself if only to prove something to himself. He can't like the thought that his yes-sir, no-sir, I'll-leave-it to you, Mister-do-all-the-dirty-work has beaten him."

Hillier moved as he spoke, but the light beam remained steady on Collier.

"You haven't beaten him. In thirty-six hours people are going to be pouring in here, witnesses to what a great guy he is. Whatever you do now, Hillier, it's too late. Sure, you might get me—though I still say you're a madman if you pull that trigger. But there's too many of us now, and too spread out."

Hillier stopped moving. "Get up," he said, his voice even. "Then start moving to your right, slowly, very slowly. I'll tell you when to stop. I warn you that I will shoot at the slightest provocation."

The hysteria was back, more noticeable. Collier rose, taking care to keep his hands visible. He followed instructions, stopped immediately he was told. If he was going to do anything, this sure as hell wasn't the moment.

Hillier had him held in the light of his helmet lamp now; the beam of the other was directed over the hole into the vault.

It provided Collier with a chance to place his position in the vault. He had stopped next to one of the pens of gold; the entrance to the vault was perhaps forty feet away; Hillier was in the middle. All that, though, was secondary in his mind to what he saw illuminated by Hillier's flashlight.

"*That* goes off in four hours—or " Hillier shone the beam on his watch, "to be more precise, in three hours, fifty-one minutes from now. You gave me time, you see, to get things ready. Not that there was much to do—connections to double

check, the spring to wind. It looks very crude, I admit, but its effectiveness lies in its sheer simplicity."

"What about me?" Collier moved imperceptibly nearer the side of the pen.

"Oh you'll be dead." Hillier smiled. "Ridiculous how many lives this island will have claimed. Do you think there might be a curse?"

Collier turned his head, reached out a hand.

"Stop!"

Collier froze, but forced himself to speak evenly. "If I'm going to die—and it looks as though I am—I think I ought at least to get a taste of what I'm dying for."

Slowly, held in the beam, he continued to extend his arm towards the brimming pen, until he could grasp a hand ful of gold chain. He lifted it, let it spill back into the pile, repeated the action, the sound of tumbling objects hypnotic. His body was tensed, half expecting a shot, but nothing happened.

"God," he said, only half for Hillier's benefit. "I can see why men kill for it."

"Can you, Collier? Can you?"

Collier did not look, but he knew from the man's tone that he was raising his hand, that the moment had come. He closed his hand on a fistful of heavy jewellery, threw himself out of the beam of light, hurling the gold as he moved.

The shot boomed and he heard the bullet ricochet, but he was hurtling forward, aiming for Hillier. He sprang, grasping what he thought was Hillier's arm, but the man broke back, and suddenly he was alone again in the darkness. He strained to hear Hillier's breathing, found it hard to separate it from his own. The man could have been a foot away—or ten.

Suddenly, the light flared, but Hillier had misjudged and had to swing it to find Collier, who threw himself sideways, only just in time. The light was out again, and he began crawling on his belly heading the only way he could go—towards the hole in the vault wall. He hit something, was too late to stop the noise of the scrape on the rock, and froze. He knew Hillier was trying to pinpoint the sound. He reached

forward carefully to check the obstruction. He could barely believe it. His hard-hat. He had made a circle back to his original position.

Hillier's light went on, held for a second, went out. The beam had fallen about three feet to Collier's right. The man had misjudged Collier's movement. He had also given away his own location.

Collier raised himself slowly to his knees, lifted the helmet, his hand on the switch. Fighting to keep his hands from trembling, he aimed it at where he imagined hoped - Hillier's face would be.

Then he pressed.

The beam was too low and to the left. It caught Hillier's shoulder. It gave him time to lift his gun, aim, but now Collier had him in the beam. Too late, though, to charge—his original idea. It would be suicide. Drawing back the hat, he spun it forward, the light whirling crazily as it rushed through the air towards Hillier's face.

Collier did not wait to see the effect. He rushed for the wall, found the gap, began to clamber through. The three shots almost ran into each other, before he realised that the third noise was not a shot, but the sound of a rock falling.

He felt other rocks hitting his legs as he dragged himself through, slithering down the slope, into the tunnel.

He paused there, unable to see, breathing the acrid smell of the dust. The fall seemed to have been short-lived. Despite the risk, he crawled back a few yards until he met rubble, confirming the vault was blocked. A man ought to be able to free it in a few hours; he doubted Hillier was harmed in there —he had been well back. Collier sure wasn't going to try now, though—not least because Hillier still had a gun with him.

Besides, he wasn't going any place. He had built his own prison. Let him wait a while until there were a few guards to pick him up as he came out.

They stood near the top of the shaft, Collier, Bowman, Bentinck, and a half dozen other men from the boat.

A little under an hour had passed since Collier had ascended the shaft and made for the radio hut to alert the General.

Bowman, who had been on the island just long enough to be briefed, checked his watch theatrically, and said, "He told you it was set for four hours?"

"Yeah. He said ten minutes had already gone."

"And it was a clock bomb?"

"That's right."

Collier waited, certain Bowman would soon direct men back down the shaft. He himself had gone down again with a light but there was no way of knowing how bad it was the other side of the slope. He would guess that clearing a gap was easily possible in the time available given relays of tough men.

Plenty of time before the bomb went off—even supposing it had not been made safe in the fall or disconnected by Hillier, who must now be trying to dig free from the other side if he was not too badly hurt.

Bowman was talking as though thinking aloud. "He could have been lying," he said. "Why should he tell you the truth? It could have been set for any time. Equally; it could have been damaged in the fall, could go off any second."

He placed his hands behind his back in his Patton stance, directed his words to Collier. "This island has claimed enough lives," he said. "Gold is only worth a certain price. We'll do nothing for 24 hours. If the bomb has not been disarmed by the fall or by Hillier, the clock will have run its time then. If there's nothing, then we'll go down."

"But, General . . ."

"But nothing!" The voice was that of the Bowman they all knew, hated and feared. He swung to face the senior guard who stood with his gun cradled. "If anyone tries to go down, you stop them, *whatever* you have to do. You understand. *Anyone.*"

Without waiting for a reaction, he began making for the Jeep.

Collier ran to catch him. Bentinck only a pace behind.

They caught him at the Jeep.

Bowman's voice was quiet, surprisingly gentle.

"Hillier has a wife," he said. "A pretty woman. A little silly perhaps and given to pretensions about her background and Borden's, but a vulnerable creature for all that. Not at all the kind of woman who could bear the burdens of accusation, trial, the loss of friends—the very ruin of her small world. If he dies down there, she will be distressed—I'm sure she loves Hillier in her way—but she will survive and will be able to cherish his memory very much more for his having died in a romantic adventure, than if he survives to disgrace her."

He paused, but neither spoke.

"There are also two pretty daughters, one married, one still at college. I am godfather to the younger. I see no reason to damage two young lives there, either, do you?"

"It'll be murder," said Collier.

"Will it?" His voice was dismissive.

"And if the bomb does not explode?"

"We'll see that in, what, twenty-one hours. It depends, I would presume, on whether Borden surrenders when called on to do so."

Collier shivered. Bowman's backup plan was simple: Hillier would be shot in trying to fight his way free.

"You do realise, General," said Bentinck, "that if the bomb does go off, you'll have lost, even if Hillier doesn't live to gain from it. The vault will be sealed for days, weeks maybe, too long for us to get back in before the lease expires. It'll just be our word that we found anything. If I was the Canadian authorities . . ." He let the sentence slide away.

Bowman got into the Jeep. "I'm going back to the ship," he said. "Come or stay here as you wish." Then, as the engine started, he answered Bentinck.

"There's a time," he said, "when you have to decide your priorities. It might hurt, but that's life."

As if on cue, the Jeep shot away.

"Christ," said Bentinck. Collier could not manage even an oath. He simply shook his head in disbelief.

The bomb exploded exactly on time, a tribute to Hillier's skill, albeit one he would rather not have had.

The fall on the vault side was greater than Collier had envisaged, and Hillier was still scratching at the rubble with bleeding hands when the explosion came. The clock had been buried deep in the fall – but had survived.

As Bowman had been warned, the explosion closed the whole of the tunnel from the shaft, leaving no possible chance of re-entry in the time available.

Fifty-one hours after the explosion the lease of Dirk's Island passed to Santander Exploration.

EPILOGUE

49

London was a disappointment to Bentinck.

He had been through the triumphant homecoming many times in his imagination, but it was hard to squeeze from the reality the savour of his fantasies. It was over five weeks since he had left Dirk's. But despite the ending of Bowman's lease—or, rather, perhaps because of it—a lot had remained to be done in New York, in Halifax, and in Ottawa.

In theory he should have seen with the eyes of buoyant optimism and success. Here he was, home at last, not only physically safe, but financially, too – Bowman's generosity, perhaps tinged with guilt, had been truly startling. Instead, London looked smaller than he remembered, more tatty and further overrun by tourists and monster tour buses. The litter and graffiti were worse than he remembered too.

He told himself that he was being absurd. What had he expected? The synthetic dignity and charm of picture postcards? This was his old home and he was, after all, on his way to see Wendy—of whose matchless and enduring worth there could be no doubt.

The thought carried him nicely over an initial qualm or two about having chosen the Grosvenor. Cavernous, impersonal, full of transients, and the last place they would be likely to meet anyone they knew, it had served them well in the past. He'd made the booking, hoping to endow this reunion with something of the perfume of earlier meetings there.

When he checked in, though, and hurried upstairs, the room oppressed him with its size and utilitarian gloom. He was still early. She would be here in a few minutes. He hung up one or two things and tried to attend to the slightly fusty smell of recirculated air. With the window open only an inch.

though, he also got the boom of train announcements from the station below. Why had he never before noticed that the filthy acreage of glass below was—had to be—the canopy of Victoria? He cleaned his teeth and fidgeted anxiously.

She tapped at the door, flew at him when he opened it, and kissed him breathlessly, fiercely. He would have preferred a longer, lingering kiss. Instead, she patted his back gently and stood off to look at him, smiling.

"You've changed!" she declared. "Of course, you look marvellously fit—but different somehow." She seized her bottom lip with her teeth, studying him ecstatically. "You've even got more hair. Now how could that be?"

Bentinck couldn't remember her remarking ever before on his thinning hair. She would sometimes brush it, tenderly, encouragingly, with her fingers, but never comment on it. Again it threw him a little off balance.

She'd had her own hair cut quite short. He decided he liked it and said so. It made her look younger, more durable. Not quite as soft, perhaps, as when it was longer. But it did a lot for the tilt of her nose and the fine curve of her forehead.

Now there was a short, nervous hiatus, and Bentinck was unsure of her and of himself. He was even unsure about his ability—if there was going to be the chance—to perform.

Well, that was nonsense, of course. What else were they here for—to exchange gossip? She was his girl, and he hadn't been close to a real live woman for months. She was exciting and he had no problems.

After a few moments he was quite sure of that.

"I was just reading about your General," she said, "coming up in the train." She sprawled across the bed, reaching for her bag. Her skirt, split in the recurrent fashion at the back, opened wide with the effort, disclosing the generous and appetising contours of her thighs. Bentinck's response was immediate and comforting. He smiled happily.

"He's in the *Telegraph*," Wendy said, sitting up. "About how he's bringing up all those gold objects made by the Aztecs. Well, not him, obviously, but his people. Did you read it?"

Lust overriding irritation, Bentinck said, "Read it? I was

there, for Godsake! I told you all about it in my letters, remember."

"Lovely letters," she said, flinging her arms round his neck. "But it's all more real to me now, somehow, seeing it in the papers."

It was easy for Bentinck to forbear saying that he and the others had found Dirk's Island terribly real, long before the *Telegraph*.

He had also read the story—and others. What none of them mentioned, what none of them knew, was how Bowman's lease had run out—but not until, hours before, he had got Mrs. Hillier to sign over the Santander Exploration company to him. He had been generous, very generous, of course. But his greatest weapon had been to play on her loyalty—and that of her husband, as she saw it.

Bowman had explained to her that he and Hillier, knowing the Canadians would allow only a limited lease, had together come up with the idea of Santander, set up in Hillier's name, but in reality a fallback for Bowman-Brace if they ran out of time. Now, with Borden's death, Bowman had explained, there might be difficulties, unless . . . The "unless" was if Santander was not legally placed in his hands. Whether the deal would have held if anyone had contested it might be debatable—but Bowman threw everything into seeing no one did. And Bentinck, in his key trips to Halifax and to Ottawa, had to admit to himself that he had done a superb job.

His attention returned to Wendy's voice. With a twinge of guilt, he realised he was finding it irritating.

"Not that everyone is pleased with your Bowman," Wendy went on. "The Canadians, some of them, are having second thoughts, some American papers are saying he's a vandal, and even the UN isn't happy."

"I'm sure I don't know why," Bentinck said cheerfully. "If it were not for Bowman it would all still be underground, undiscovered. But forget that. Come here, I want to make up for however-many months." With her head in the crook of his left arm he kissed her, reaching under her skirt.

Not too many women, he thought detachedly, made love

like Wendy. Neither shy nor shameless, never either coy or demanding, she relaxed into sex as if into a warm bath. She could use him and be used, achieving an atmosphere of loving exchange. It was quite wonderful. He was delighted with her, thrilled with the maturity of her body; glad even that, aesthetically speaking, she was too big in the thigh, too heavy in the breast.

Almost as soon as it was over, while they were still clinging in silence to sensation, he was amused to find he wanted to begin all over again. This time on the floor, in the bathroom, or standing in the angle of the weirdly huge room. Erotic snapshots fired off in his mind and he wondered if she had the time. He reached down for his wristwatch on the floor. It was five. He drew Wendy close, his need thoroughly rekindled.

"Oof," she said after a moment. "You really are fit."

"Plenty of time. It's only five."

She sat up at once, switching off. "I'm supposed to be shopping." She gathered up her clothes, moved towards the bathroom and looked back at him. "I didn't see anything I liked, except here," she giggled.

When she came out of the shower to sit, pulling at her hair, he asked, "When will I see you next?"

At once she put down her spiky, plastic brush. She met his eyes only in the dressing-table mirror. "Crunch time," she said in a small voice.

Bentinck sensed disaster at once and fled to the shower. He didn't want to hear. He could neither face bad news nor absorb it while at the psychological disadvantage of naked, sexual need. Fully dressed and with sex behind him he might be better able to summon hurt, disappointment or whatever.

He dressed rapidly and was almost finished before he realised she was crying. He took her tenderly on his lap.

It seemed that Ralph had a new job; for him, the job of a lifetime: well paid, liberally endowed with fringe benefits—and in Brussels. Something to do with the EEC.

"Oh, Nick," she sniffled. "What can I do? I have to go. I wanted to write to you about it when it first came up, but with you all that distance away it didn't seem fair. Not that you could have helped or anything even if you'd been

here. And then today, I thought at least let us have this to remember . . ."

"Remember?" Bentinck was chilled. "Don't say things like that Wendy. If Ralph can get a job in Brussels, so can I. Better still, don't go. Make the break a little sooner, that's all."

"No," she shook her head, the tears returning.

"Don't say no, Wendy. Say you'll think about it. Say anything except no. Look, when do you leave?"

She sobbed louder. At last he heard the word, Wednesday.

"My God," Bentinck said. "What have you done? You've cut it a bit fine. Still, even that isn't insuperable."

"I didn't cut it fine," she said huskily. "I came as soon as I knew where you were. Yesterday you were thousands of miles away. How could I tell you then, in a letter, just like that?"

She was right. He could not blame her, push her or use levers. The fault was his. If he had wanted her he ought to have been here and, equipped with a proper plan, snatched her from Ralph.

He sat on the edge of the bed, watching dust pouring down triple shafts of late afternoon sunlight. When he turned, at last, she was repairing her makeup.

"I'll think of something, get there somehow," he said cheerfully. "You'll be just a short flight away, that's all. And it's only for a short time after all. How long is it now, until you're free?"

"You'll be in London?" she said. She held out her hand and he pressed it tenderly.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "Here or in New York. What's the difference? We'll be together as planned in the end, won't we?" He pulled her to her feet and cuddled her. "Won't we?"

"Yes," she whispered.

It was a lie they compounded together, knowing that it left them free or pledged as they wished, according to how it fell or how it felt.

Much later, after he had seen Wendy to her train, he walked miserably through the West End, undecided what to

do. Either he had outgrown London or it had outgrown him. Familiar streets, old rendezvous gave back no tinkling echo of nostalgia. Without the need to test it further as a theory, he sensed that London was as much as anything a state of mind, a place you were either into or very much out of. Trying to feel your way back was a little like trying to revisit an old place of work: they didn't do it that way any more, everyone had moved on, the rules had changed, the fads and forms were unfamiliar; if there were familiar faces at all, they were preoccupied with now, looking past you incuriously. Sadly, he remembered restaurants where his name had commanded favourite tables; the trendy block of flats he had waited a year to get into. Like the Savile Row suits, they were part of yesterday's game.

What then? Go home to Gloucestershire? Hardly. If he had ever liked farm, hunt and horse talk it might have been amusing for a week or two, while he considered his position. But he didn't and it wouldn't. Even more claustrophobic was the notion of spending any time at all with the Bentinck women.

He stopped to let a crowd of foreign students pass by. Waiting, he caught sight of his face in a mirror in a shop window. The look of dejection was total. Suddenly he found it amusing. He was, he realised in a flash of self-understanding, enjoying his misery! There was no doubt, of course, that his heart really was broken. And hadn't he done everything he could for her alone and for their future together? He had done it because he loved her and because she was a lovely, wonderful, desirable woman. But she was also—and his mind only whispered this because he had only just realised it—a bit of a bore. So, so, so—he groped for the word. He found it—small-town

He fought down the thoughts before they grew, turned his attention back to his own immediate problem as to where to go.

New York? What about New York. He was something of a hero there, of course, after Dirk's, and what he had done after Hillier's death. But he had burnt that bridge, too, hadn't he? Bowman had confidently offered him greater scope,

bigger money, sure that he would accept. Still burning over Bowman's arrogant, monomaniac handling of the whole Dirk's affair, he had stiffly accepted the General's bonuses and flamboyantly stalked away from Bowman, BBMC and the whole thing. If he had needed anything at all to bolster his resolve he would have found it in Bowman's last words as they shook hands politely.

"You'll be back," Bowman had said.

50

In New York that weekend Collier and Brooks were busy moving into a new apartment. They had also bought a car, shopped for furniture and Collier had removed from storage an astounding build-up of personal effects acquired over his footloose years in the field.

At Bowman-Brace Kelso had gone and his office was now Collier's, along with the job. For a day or two BBMC would have to get along without him, but the challenge of controlling the corporation's world-wide operations was another delight waiting to be relished.

He and Brooks were kept busy all day, stepping around piles of books, glassware, dishes and kitchen equipment to answer the door to fresh deliveries. Field clothes, ranging from heavy woollens to some faded, tropical stuff Collier had once used in Mexico, joined Brooks's more elegant garments in closets. So too did the new business suits Collier would be delighted to begin wearing Monday morning.

His first phone call was from the after-hours operator at BBMC, asking permission to give his new number to someone called Bentinck in London. It was late; Brooks had already gone to bed. He was surveying the remaining chaos, about to join her, when Nick Bentinck's call came through.

"How was Wendy?" Collier said at once.

A long sigh. "Don't ask," Bentinck told him.

"Well, you can tell me over a beer some time."

"A beer?"

"When you're back," Collier explained.

"What makes you think I'm coming back?" Bentinck demanded.

"Well, if you're not, why are you ringing?"

Bentinck didn't know. When he'd picked up the phone he had some hazy notion that the decision might be made for him. Collier, however, clearly had no intention of making it easy.

The silence hung between them. In London Bentinck looked round his bleak hotel room. The fragile link with New York was the catalyst that he had needed. He knew with complete certainty that there was no job for him anywhere in England, no executive position nine to five at any desk, which would hold him for more than a few weeks. Dirk's had done that too. He hadn't been a complete washout as an executive type, but the only thing he'd done that satisfied something in him that he hadn't even known about, was setting up the Dirk's thing and finding out that he had the guts to stay with it.

"What use would I be to Bowman?" he said tentatively, hopefully.

Collier laughed. "Don't ask me. But there's a whole bloody Bowman-Brace world to try yourself out in. Up to you, fella."

"You think Bowman's offer is still open?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm coming back," Bentinck said.

"In that case, I have a message for you," Collier said, "from the General himself."

"What is it?"

"What kept you?" Collier said, and hung up.

Off the coast of Nova Scotia lie a cluster of islands with an ancient and mysterious secret — a possible buried treasure that has tantalised explorers since the discovery of 300-year-old man-made shafts on Oak Island. The shafts are mined to defeat the most intrepid and determined of engineers, even the team headed by Alan Collier, brilliant but sceptical employee of Alex Bowman, American mining corporation magnate.

Bowman and Collier are confident of success. However, when a series of major mishaps and deaths overtake the expedition they can no longer ignore the possibility of a malevolent force on the island, intent on the destruction of their plans.

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